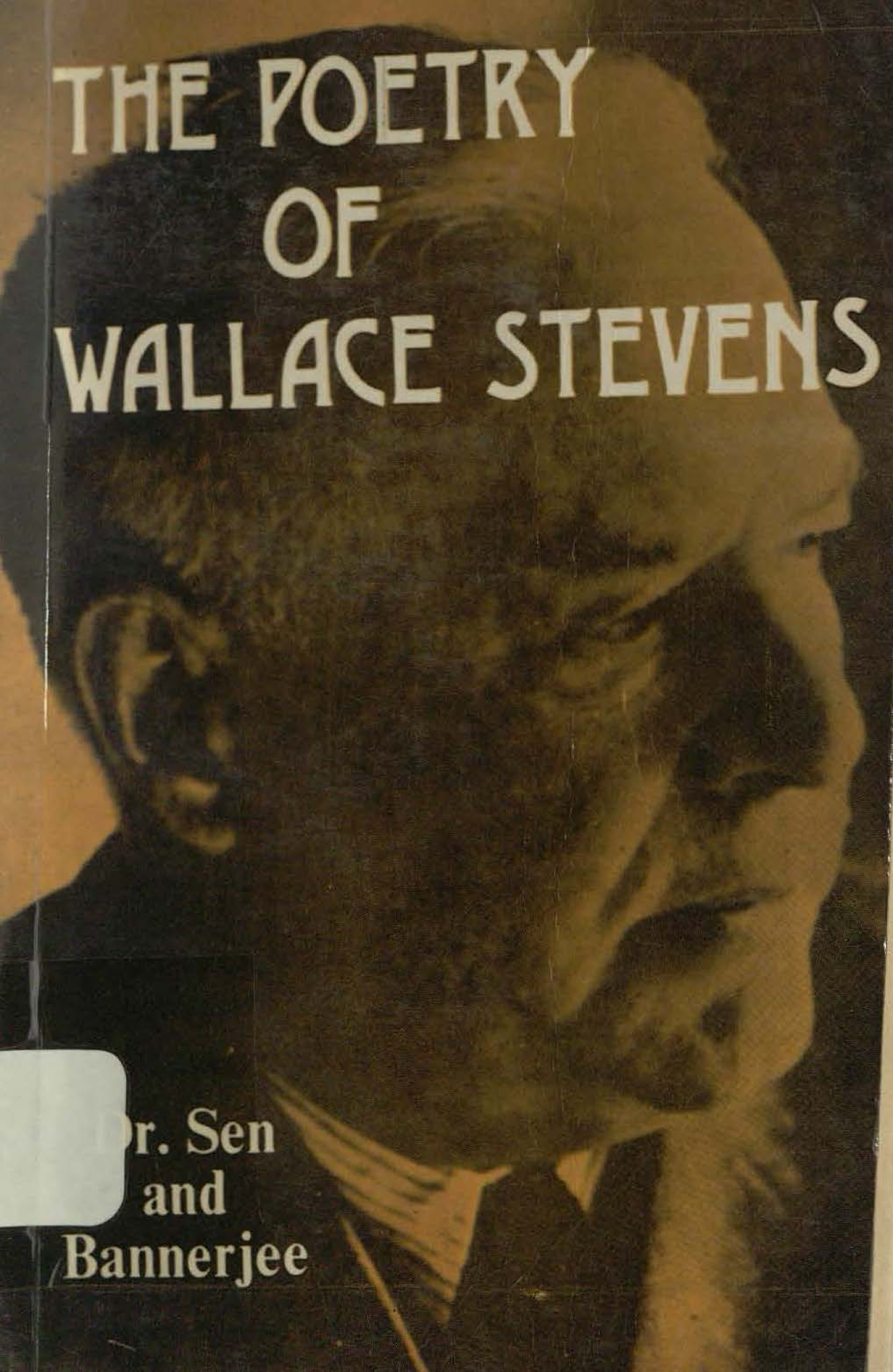


THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

Dr. Sen
and
Bannerjee

THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

(Containing Introduction, Critical Commentary of Selected Poems and Questions with their Model Answers)

By

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21. Write a short essay on Wallace Stevens' theory of poetry and show its relation to his actual poetic practice.

INTRODUCTION

1

Wallace Stevens: Life, Works and Literary Heritage

Both as poet and man Wallace Stevens was an enigmatic personality. Just as he combined poetry and insurance as his main concerns during his life, in poetry he combined several traditions and influences and evolved a poetry out of the juxtaposition, if not unity, of opposites. He is not only a modern poet but also a difficult, and enigmatic poet. As Daniel Fuchs has aptly remarked, "Reading Stevens poses an immediate problem. The reader is dazzled by display of verbal pyrotechnics, a shower of exotic colours, wondrous sound-effects, inkhorn words, hoo-hooes and rum-tum-tums, euphonous geography, exquisite insults. The reader may well not survive his bedazzlement. Or if he is spirited enough to indulge his imagination and see what it is that Stevens is doing, Stevens' ideas may prove to be even more disquieting than his formidable means of expressing them, and the poet go unread on that account. Stevens dares you to read him, and there was a time when few accepted the challenge."

1. LIFE

Birth and Parentage

Wallace Stevens was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 1879. Surrounded by farms, Reading is full of factories, providing what Stevens could call an atmosphere of Oxidia. He was a Pennsylvanian Dutchman genuine Holland Dutch rather than German Dutch as he frequently insisted. His father was a lawyer by profession, a poet by avocation a Presbyterian by religious denomination, and a democrat in his political views. Though his mother's name—Zeller—is German, Stevens is a Dutch name.

Education

Wallace Stevens studied at Harvard University, but left it without a degree. Here, he came in contact with a great modern philosopher, George Santayana Though Stevens did not attend any of his courses at Harvard and never heard his lecture on

philosophy, yet he frequently met the philosopher who too took more than ordinary interest in the sophomoric poetry of early Stevens. Later Wallace Stevens repaid his debt by writing a powerful elegy "To an Old Philosopher of Rome" after the death of this philosopher. In Santayana's life Wallace Stevens found the kind of synthesis that he considered ideal in a man. As he wrote in the *Necessary Angel*, "There can be lives, nevertheless, which exist by the deliberate choice of those that live them. To use a single illustration: it may be assumed that the life of Professor Santayana is a life in which the function of the imagination has had a function similar to its function in any deliberate work of art or letters. We have only to think of this present phase of it, in which, in his old age, he dwells in the head of the world, in the company of devoted women, in their convent, and in the company of familiar saints, whose presence does so much to make any convent an appropriate refuge for a generous and human philosopher."

In 1901 Wallace Stevens went to the New York Law School. He was admitted to the bar in 1904 and joined the legal department of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company.

Stevens' Professional Career

It may seem quite odd to think of a poet's professional career as other than the writing of poetry, but for Stevens poetry was an avocation, not a business. After a brief stint as a journalist joined the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company and remained in it until the end of his life. In 1934 he became its vice-president, an office which he held until his death.

Poetry and insurance do not seem to go well together, but in case of Wallace Stevens, they certainly did. In fact he scccessfully kept the two sides apart. In the morning and evening at home or on his way to the insurance office he composed poems but never allowed poetry to interfere with his insurance business. "We don't talk about poetry here," Stevens told his biographer Samuel French Morse at the Hartford Canoe Club. William York Tindall narrates an interesting incident of his meeting with one of Stevens' fellow-executives in the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. When Tindall told the executive that Stevens' official correspondence may be important, the executive wondered, 'Wally's letters valuable ?" When Tindall said that Wallace Stevens was an important man, the executive said, 'Wally important?' And when Tindall said that Wallace Stevens was a wonderful modern poet, the executive incredulously asked him, 'Wally! Poetry!"

Wallace Stevens' Private Life and His Temperament

Not much is known about Stevens' private life except that he married Elsie V. Kachel in 1909 after a four-year long courtship. His letters addressed to her (in which she is addressed as 'Bo-Bo') talk more about his views on imagination and the world, and his

experiences than about any concrete episodes from his life. One daughter, Holly Stevens, blessed this marriage in 1924.

In his political affiliations Stevens was a confirmed Republican who found even Eisenhower far too radical! But as a poet, he said, he had no politics. When Burnshaw found fault with his *Ideas of Order* on the ground that these poems did not deal with important social issues of his time, Stevens retorted with a satirical portrait of Burnshaw in his 'Owl's Clover'. But otherwise he was a congenial soul who loved fine things of life: a good living, good wines and clothes and pictures.[1] Though he earned substantial income from the company, he did not keep any car, nor did he leave much behind. Though shy by nature, he did not hesitate to talk about poetry in academic gatherings. He was also on intimate terms with another well-known poet of America, William Carlos Williams.

2. HIS WORKS

Though Stevens had started writing poetry from his student days and published some poems in periodicals, his first collection of poems, *Harmonium*, appeared when he was forty-four years old. After that he did not publish any collection for another thirteen years. However, his poetic career spanned almost half a century and has been divided into several periods by his biographers and critics. According to Samuel French Morse, Stevens' poetry belongs to four distinct phases: (a) Juvenilia of 1879-1916, (b) *Harmonium* years 1916-1930, (c) revaluation period 1930-1945, and (d) the mellowed poems of 1945-1955. On biographical evidence Morse finds that during the first phase Stevens shows a great regard for his home, parents, and Dutch heritage, and that *Harmonium* years are marked by wit and youthful playfulness and a poetic concern with things as they are. In the third phase, Stevens returns to his art after a long dormant period. During this phase, according to Morse, the events in the poet's life led to the creation of a complacent art despite the social and political turmoils of this period. Finally, Morse notes that in the last period Stevens turns to a gentler, more discursive verse written in plain speech. Each of these phases, according to Morse, is marked by a difference in style, the two extremes of which are the gaudiness in the early poetry and plainness in the late poetry. In addition, there were different emphases in Stevens' thematic concerns too. Be that as it may, it is difficult to believe in such a compartmentalization in the development of Stevens' poetic genius; for thematically, Stevens' concern with imagination and reality and the interaction between the two remains throughout his poetic career; stylistically, an early poem like 'The Snow Man' is as tellingly bare and plain as a later poem like 'A Clear Day and No memories.' It is therefore preferable to talk in terms of different collections of poems during Stevens' poetic career rather than think in terms of 'phases' in his life and art.

Harmonium

Stevens' first book of poetry, *Harmonium*, was published in 1923, when he was forty-four and already well-established in his insurance career. The book was not well-received and Stevens did not publish anything for a number of years partly because of his disappointment at the literary reception of *Harmonium* and partly because of his preoccupations with his insurance business. Today of course it is recognized as a remarkable example of modern poetry. What is more, the poems in this collection deal with Stevens' life-long concern with imagination and reality, and the interaction between the two. If a poem like 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon' argues that reality is what the perceiver's imagination makes of it "I was the world in which I walked, and what I was/or heard or felt came not but from myself"—another poem like 'The Snow Man' argues equally forcefully that "One must have a mind of winter/To regard the frost and the boughs/Of the pine-trees crusted with snow" and look only at "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." Yet another poem, 'Sunday Morning' for example, iconoclastically argues for rejecting human projections, but at the same time emphasizes a belief in a new fiction of the sun-centred world, where the sun is not a god but as a god might be.

But if he argues for the rejection of abstractions, his anecdotes—"Anecdote of the Jar," "Earthy Anecdote," and "Anecdote of Canna"—are particularized adages. Then there are the serio-comic poems like "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and "The Comedian as the Letter C." Stevens, it seems, is experimenting with various verse forms and yet creating a style and kind of poetry which is entirely his own. This is why his poems in this collection have a certain gaudiness of style. His langunge shows a certain gaiety which is youthful for a man of forty-four. As Paul Rosenfeld wrote in 1925, ". . . so novel and fantastic is the tintinnabulation of unusual words, and words unusally rhymed and arranged, that you nearly overlook the significations, and hear outlandish sharp and melting musics. While the motley collection prances past, a horn winds its golden cantilene; funeral tam-tams pulse; a violin modulates sharply through quarter-tones and metal particles chunk and chink. Irregular and occasional interior rhymes furnish curious accords. And mixed with the instrumental tones, the fowl persuasion utters its proper squawky staccato: clucking of strutting bantams". "Bantams in Pine-words" is a fine example of this outlandish style and verbal dandyism:

> Cheiftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
> Of tan with henna hackles, halt!
> Damned universal cock, as if the sun
> Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.
> Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.
> Your world is you. I am my world.

Ideas of Order

The second collection of poetry to come from Wallace Stevens was *Ideas of Order*, published in 1935. In this collection, according to Joseph Riddel, "the poet becomes more attuned to external, universal realities which are coercive and threatening to the spirit as well as the body. It needs to be emphasized, however, that the order Stevens thinks of is aesthetic rather than social or political. The order that is ultimately achieved in 'The Idea of Order at Key West,' for example, is the creation of a single artificer who makes the world even as she sings in it. In any case, the subject is found in Stevens' early poem 'Anecdote of the Jar,' where a man-made artifact imposes order on the slovenly wildernesses of Tennessee.

The Man with the Blue Guitar

The volume to follow *Ideas of Order* was *Owl's Clover* which Stevens did not include in the *Collected Poems*. *The Man with the Blue Guitar* was published in 1937. The most important poem in this group is 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' which consists of thirty-seven short poems, written in couplets. Throughout the series of these poems, blue guitar is the symbol of imagination. This poem, according to Vendler, makes Stevens' return to the simple and basic in poetry; stripped vocabulary, syntax reduced to declarative sentences, and rhetoric to simple indication.

Parts of a World

Parts of a World was published by Knopf in 1942. This collection, as Frank Kermode observes, is a prelude to Stevens' more ambitious "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," for Stevens is here concerned with academic exercises, and theorizing about poetry. Poems such as 'Poetry is a Destructive Force,' 'The Poems of Our Climate,' and 'Of Modern Poetry' reveal Stevens' tentative ideas on poetry, while 'The Glass of Water', 'Connoisseur of Chaos', and 'Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas' are academic pieces in the sense that they join issues with traditional, academic ideas about the world, order and imagination. Joseph N. Riddel considers this value as technically an advance over Stevens' earlier work. According to him, this maturity in technique consists in a style based on assertion, formulation, and exposition aimed at showing a sense of the perpetual process.

Transport to Summer

Before he published his next major collection entitled *Transport to Summer* in 1947, Stevens had earlier brought out a limited edition to 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' in 1942. Later he included this long poem in *Transport to Summer*. This was quite appropriate since in the rest of the volume too Stevens is concerned with his ideas on poetry as a supreme fiction. As Riddel observes, *Transport to Summer* examines the very devices that poetry manipulates. The most outstanding poems in this collection are

'Credences of Summer' and 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'. In the former the poet exhibits a control of his tone coupled with a fine sensitivity to fine nuances which reminds one of *Harmonium*. The latter, as Marius Bewley says, "will possibly by Stevens' greatest achievement, and it should be one of the great adornments of American literature—a set of thirty meditations on the nature of imagination".

Auroras of Autumn

The Auroras of Autumn, published in 1950, followed *Transport to Summer*. According to Riddel, Stevens in this volume is trying to extend the boundaries of poetry to encompass presentation of the mind in the process of creating and decreating. The title poem, 'Auroras of Autumn' is a cycle of ten poems, each of twenty-four lines arranged in groups of three. In this poem Stevens returns to the half-dead and metaphorically stimulating world of autumn and compounds the indeterminancy. Other famous poems in this collection are 'The Ultimate Poem is Abstract', 'The Old Lutheran Bells at Home', and 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven'.

The Rock

The last group of poems published in *The Collected Poems* is entitled *The Rock*. The title given to the group also figures as a symbolic image in a number of more important poems and, as Ralph J Mills, Jr. has noted, "It becomes evident that this symbol is appointed a heavy burden". Some of the pieces in this group of poems are indeed very fine poems. Mills also notes how the "two primary components of Stevens' poetic cosmos, the brute material fact and the imagination which lends it meaning and value, are joined in the image of the rock". 'To an Old Philosopher of Rome', Stevens' poetic tribute to George Santayana, is easily one of the finest poems in this collection, while "Not Ideas about the Things but the Thing Itself" appropriately concludes this section and reaffirms Stevens' life-long concern with reality bare of human projections.

Prose Works

Stevens liked to talk about his poetry and published in *The Necessary Angel* some of his essays which had earlier been delivered as lectures before academic gatherings. The subtitle—"Essays on Reality and Imagination"—appropriately explains the theme of this prose work. His other essays and unpublished poems were published in *Opus Posthumous* in 1957, two years after his death in 1955.

Recognition

As mentioned above, Stevens' first collection of poems, *Harmonium*, was not well received, partly because of the difficulties in

style and diction and partly because other famous works by more well-known writers, T. S. Eliot for example, appeared during the same period. The gaudiness of his verse, his dandyism, and his symbolism also offered some problems and for quite some time Stevens remained a poet of the elite class. But before he died in 1955, his genius had been properly recognized. He was given the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and the National Book Award in 1955. Today he is recognized as one of the greatest modern poets of America and many books have been written on him.

3. LITERARY HERITAGE

While Stevens' placing as a remarkable modern poet is no longer in doubt, critics have been exercised over the issue of his literary heritage. While some consider him a descendant of Whitman and the transcendentalist Emerson, others are quick to point out the affinities between Stevens and the French modern poets. Not only this, some critics have been quick to point out Stevens' complicated relation to the British romantic poets, notably Coleridge and Wordsworth.

The American Heritage

Most critics have sought to place Stevens in the tradition of the Adamic poets of America, notably Walt Whitman. Roy Harvey Pearce and Joseph Riddel, for example, find in Stevens a distant descendant of this great American poet. According to Pearce, the discussion of philosophical issues put Stevens in the tradition of both Whitman and Emerson. According to him, Stevens is, like Emerson and Whitman, the American poet wanting to become Adam, but since Stevens is a twentieth century poet; this wish leads him to the discovery that wanting to become Adam is no longer wanting to be man but god. Similarly, Diane Wood Middlebrook in her *Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens* emphasizes the praise of of imagination in both the poets as well as their use and creation of myths. According to Riddle, Whitman's vision of 'cosmic consciousness' climaxes in Stevens as an "existential consciousness."

The French Tradition

Many critics, however, consider Stevens' poetry as influenced by the French Symboliste movement. Hi Simmons, for example, compares Stevens with Mallarmé and supports the comparison by saying that both the poets are concerned with the problems of poetics and the role of a poet in his society. William York Tindall finds Stevens close to Baudelaire, while some others think that he is close too Forgue. Interestingly, when Stevens himself was asked about the question of French influence, he replied, "The lightness; the grace, the sound and color of French have had an undeniable and precious influence on me." The answer is, no doubt, equivocal and many critics believe that the indebtedness extended to some-

thing much more than "the lightness, the grace, the sound and color of French."

British Romantic Tradition

Though Stevens' modernity is nowhere in doubt, yet many Stevens critics have seen in his poetry traces of the British Romantic tradition. *Southern Review*, for example, devoted its July 1971 number to study Wallace Stevens' poetry in the light of the Romantic heritage. According to Huston, Stevens is quite clearly an heir of Wordsworth for in the work of both Wordsworth and Stevens, says Huston, 'the universe containing and contained in the consciousness of the observer is perceived directly' with no 'mediating figure between the poet and the visible concrete natural world.' Diane Wood Middlebrook, on the other hand, compares Stevens with Coleridge. According to this critic, Stevens' theory of imagination is fairly close to Coleridge's. Similarly, O'Connor notes that both Coleridge and Stevens oppose as dichotomies the imagination and the rationalist mind and both of them view imagination as a way of establishing communion with nature.

The Modern Tradition

Many other critics, however, have compared Stevens with some well-known modern poets, American and British. While John Crowe Ransom and Karl Spiro place Stevens in the modernist tradition, Leonard E. Nathan argues that Stevens' poety is counter to the trend of the times. Other critics have traced Stevens' affinities with imagist, symbolism, and impressionism. J. V. Cunningham provides a balanced view by examining the traditional and the modernist elements in the poetry of Stevens. The complex relation between tradition and modernity in Stevens' poetry becomes clearer if one examines 'Sunday Morning' as Cunningham does. According to Cunningham, 'The poem is an agrument against the traditional Christianity of Stevens' youth, and especially against the doctrine and expectation of immortality, 'in favour of an earthly and mortal existence that in the felt apprehension of sensory detail can attain a vivid oneness with its surroundings and a religious sense of union comparable to the traditional feeling. The former is undeniably traditional, and much of the deep feeling of the poem is derived from the exposition in sustained and traditional rhetoric of the position which is denied. In this sense it is parasitic on what it rejects.' The last sentence aptly describes this relation: '. . .it is parasitic on what it rejects.' ☐

2

Principal Features of Stevens' Poetry

When Wallace Stevens published his first collection of poems, *Harmonium*, in 1923, there were a few readers interested in what he wrote, though the few that did read his first collection were surprised by the originality and brilliance of his poetry. Before he died in 1955, Stevens had not only been honoured with more than one award for poetry but also recognized as a major modern poet of our times. Critics have since been uncertain regarding the tradition to which Stevens belongs, but there has been little doubt about his originality and greatness. It is, however, quite difficult to say which of the following features, singly or in certain combination, is the most dominant in his poetry, but these are generally recognized as the main characteristics of his poetry: a certain gaudiness of vocabulary, a delight in sensuous experience, a markedly intellectual quality, a modernist inquiry into the nature of reality, and into the nature of relation between imagination, perception and description, and of course certain obscurity and complexity. Let us now discuss each of these features at some length and with illustrations from his well-known poems.

Gaudiness and Dandyism

Perhaps the most remarkable, though much less important, features of Stevens' poetry are its gaudiness and dandyism. The French poet Baudelaire defined literary dandyism in his 'The Painter to Modern Life', thus: "Dandyism is above all a burning need to acquire originality, within the apparent bonds of convention. It is a sort of cult of oneself, which can dispense even with what are commonly called illusions. It is the delight in causing astonishment, and the proud satisfaction of never oneself being astonished. . . . Dandyism is the last gleam of heroism in times of decadence". Stevens is a dandy because his poetry, according to Daniel Fuchs, shows "the qualities of deflationary assault, disillusion, icy elegance, oddity, uniqueness, self-conscious absorption, the desire to astonish and a new, complex, and in some sense bizarre means of expression". Stevens does demonstrate, at least in *Harmonium*, the tendency to over-dress his language with a view to astonishing his readers. In the well-known 'Bantams in Pine-Woods', this is how he describes the attitude of the inchling cocks to Azcan:

Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
Of ten with henna hackles, halt!
Damned universal cock, as if the sun
Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.
Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal
Your world is you. I am my world.

Of course when one sees the ordinary cocks compared with inchling poets and Azcan with imagination, the meaning of the poem turns out to be as rich as the dress in which it is clothed.

Along with this dandiacal dressing up of words and phrases and the use of archaic, rare, invented words, goes the general gaiety, a sheer delight in this dressing up of language. "Life in Motion" is a small case in point:

In Oklahoma,
Bonnie and Josie,
Dressed in Calico,
Danced around a stump.
They carried,
"Ohoyaho,
Ohoo" . . .
Celebrating the marriage
Of flesh and air.

Poems such as 'Floral Decorations for Bananas', 'Exposition of the Contents of a Cab', 'Nomad Exquisite' fully bring out the gaudiness of Stevens' poetry, which is for him a way of covering reality. As Susan Weston remarks, ". . . his highly wrought connotations cover up—'embroider'—blankness. It is less the picture of reality that gives pause to the reader of Stevens' *Harmonium* than the elaborate devices he uses to cover it up. Just as his favorite images are clothes—the wigs, gowns, hats, and cloaks of the imagination draping naked reality—so too his favorite poetic device is some form of linguistic embroidery: nonsense syllables, radical diction, wide-ranging analogies, and equivocally adopted figures of speech. Stevens' verbal pyrotechnics are more often a stumbling-block than his subject, for they either create an apparently impenetrable surface to the poem or modify the paraphrasable content to the subtle ambiguities". But as R.P. Blackmur says, though Stevens does use unfamiliar words, such as fubbed, girandoles, curlicues catarrhs, gobbet, diaphanes, clopping, minuscule, pannicles, buffo, princox, each of these words is definitely meant in the context. The gaudiness is thus not for its own sake, but it is meant to serve a definite poetic purpose.

Gaiety and Delight in the World

Along with verbal gaudiness and gaiety Stevens' poetry shows a rare delight in this world, its sensuous pleasures and beautiful

sights and scenes. Stevens did not believe in any after-life or a paradise above or beyond the earth; for him this earth with all its changing phases, seasons, and flux, evil and mortality was a delightful place. As Randall Jarrell has pointed out, "At the bottom of Stevens' poetry there is wonder and delight, the child's or animal's or savage's—man's—joy in his own existence, and thankfulness for it. He is the poet of well-being: "One might have thought of sight, but who could think/Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees?' This sigh of awe, of wondering pleasure, is underneath all the poems that show us the 'celestial possible', everything that has not yet been transformed into the infernal impossibilities of our everyday earth. . . . There is about him, under the translucent glazes, a Dutch solidity and weight, he sits surrounded by all the good things of this earth, with rosy cheeks and fresh clear blue eyes, eyes not going out to you but shining in their place, like fixed stars—or else he moves off, like the bishop in his poem, 'globed in today and tomorrow'."

Such a delight in existence, in being in this world, is the subject of many poems in *Harmonium* as well as in the later volumes. Anything that is inimical to man's enjoyment of the world is irritating for Stevens. The persona's delight in 'Ploughing on Sunday' is in fact characteristic of many poems of Stevens and also of his general attitude:

> The white cock's tail
> Tosses in the wind.
> The turkey-cock's tail
> Glitters in the sun.
>
> Water in the fields.
> The wind pours down.
> The feathers flare
> And bluster in the wind.
>
> Tum-ti-tum,
> Ti-tum-tum-tum!
> The turkey-cock's tail
> Spreads to the sun.

Even in mature poems like "The Idea of Order at Key West" and "Sunday Morning" Stevens enjoys being in the world and singing about it in a full throated ease.

Heterodoxy

Stevens shares with most modern poets a general distrust of inherited religious beliefs and philosophical systems. According to him, these systems and modes of belief have lost their relevance today and become a barrier to man's coming to terms with reality. This is why he often emphasizes the need to concentrate on this life and forget everything which makes it unhappy or uncomfort-

able. The Christian lady in 'Sunday Morning' is perfectly in harmony with her environment, but it is the traditional thought of Christianity and her feeling of guilt at enjoying the pleasant sunshine on the terrace rather than being at the church:

> Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
> Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
> And the green freedom of cockatoo
> Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
> The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.

But as soon as she begins to dream of the 'old catastrophe' "the pungent oranges and bring, green wings/Seem things in some procession of the dead", and her mind travels back to "silent Palestine/ Dominion of the blood and sepulchre." This guilt complex remains until the lady hears a voice which says:

> "The tomb in Palestine
> Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
> It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay".

"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" is much more severe on traditional religion and equates the 'haunted heaven' of Christianity with the peristyle of a masque:

> Take the moral law and make a nave of it
> And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus, .
> The conscience is converted palms,
> Like windy citherns hankering for hymns . . . Take
> The opposing law and make a peristyle,
> And from the peristyle project a masque
> Beyond the planets . . . . . And palm for palm,
> Madame, we are where we began.

Stevens is similarly severe on philosophical systems which emphasize abstractions at the cost of concrete reality. His own response to the problems of change and morality and evil in life is simply this: they are part of life and have to be accepted. "Death is the mother of beauty," and the only reality is the reality of "the emperor of ice-cream". It is on this reality that the 'lamp' 'must affix its beam'.

Wit and Satire

Stevens' heterodoxy and his criticism of traditional beliefs and ideas make him employ satire and wit as effective means of deflation. In "A High Toned Old Christian Woman" and "The Doctor of Geneva" Stevens attacks puritanism because the old lady as well as the doctor falsify nature. In "The Bird with the Coppery Keen Claws", the omnipotent, the omniscient is seen as an impassive principle of intellect:

> Above the forest of the parakeets,
> A parakeet of parakeet prevails . . .
> His lids are white because his eyes are blind.

As Daniel Fuchs remarks, "the king of parakeets remains a caricature of a god of reason, an unmoved mover indeed". "The Comedian as the Letter C" is a satire on romantic illusion and the quest motif. Instead of transcendence, this man ultimately arrives at a vision of reality just as the idea of his founding a colony materializes in only a small house where he begets four daughters. There is a similar indecorous wit in "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man" :

> One's grand flights, one's Sunday baths,
> One's tootings at the wedding of the soul
> Occur as they occur.

In caricaturing this object Stevens does not hesitate to parody traditional styles and modes of expression. In "La Monocle de Mon Oncle", parody is employed to satirize the traditional attitudes and then juxtaposed with the reality of self-caricature:

> "Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
> O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon,
> There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,
> Like the clashed edges of two words that kill."
> And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.
> Or was it that I mocked myself alone?
> I wish that I might be a thinking stone.

Sometime even God is made a parody of the idea of omniscience and omnipotence: 'Negation' is a case in point:

> Hi! The creator too is blind,
> Struggling toward his harmonious whole,
> Rejecting intermediate parts,
> Horrors and falsities and wrongs;
> Incapable master of all force,
> Too vague idealist, overwhelmed
> By an afflatus that persists.

Stevens' Theory of Imagination and Reality

It is easy to attack old systems with the help of satire, wit and mockery, but difficult to conceive of a coherent world-view at the same time. Stevens does precisely this by creating a new order which emerges out of the interaction between imagination and reality and is entirely secular, this-worldly, and transient. He is also aware of the difference between conception and perception on the one hand, and between perception and description on the other. In order to create an imaginative order, one must first encounter

reality without any pre-conceived notions about what it is. 'The Snow Man' emphasizes the need to have a mind of winter if one has to look at a winter landscape and not see in it any human misery:

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
>
> . . . .
>
> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Sometime the pressure of reality may be too much and one may simply fail to describe it, as it happens with "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad". Plain reality may at times be totally unacceptable to the mind which yearns for some complexity, as Stevens recognizes in "The Poems of Our Climate":

> Say even that this complete simplicity
> Stripped one of all one's torments, concealed
> The evilly compounded, vital I
> And made it fresh in a world of white,
> A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,
> Still one would want more, one would need more,
> More than a world of white and snowy scents.

Nevertheless, the task of a poet is to create order out of chaos, an Olympia out of Oxidia. Stevens himself creates such imaginative orders in both the 'Idea of Order at Key West' and 'Sunday Morning'. In the former, a solitary singer imposes form on the meaningless sound of the sea; in 'Sunday Morning', a new myth about the sun, "not as god, but as god might be" is created to counter the Christian myth of the tomb in silent Palestine. In a small poem, 'Ancedote of the Jar', a barren and bare, man-made jar imposes order on the solvenly wildernesses of Tennessee. But it is to be noted that Stevens sees a closer interaction between imagination and reality and does not believe in the romantic flights of imagination.

Stevens' search for an imaginative order led him to believe in a supreme fiction which must simultaneously be 'abstract,' 'must change,' and still 'must give pleasure.' The poet, wrote Stevens, 'creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and . . ." gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. "The honey of common summer might be enough," but only when a poet enables us to see it through his verbal constructions.

The Intellectual and Metaphysical Quality

Most modern poetry is shy of a spontaneous expression of feeling and in fact looks for a unification of thought and feeling.

Stevens' poetry is no exception to this general trend. He is for the most part concerned either with the creation of a new poetic order which simultaneously partakes of the worlds' beauty and the beholder's feelings and thoughts, and provides an intellectual abstraction based on the concrete experience. For this reason many critics have gone to the extent of calling Stevens a philosophical poet. Hi Simons, for example, traces Stevens' affinities with both the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century and intellectual poets of the twentieth. Richard Macksay, on the other hand, compares Stevens' cyclical mind to Leibniz's monad; his confrontation of pure being to Hegel's; his attention to the thing itself to Husserl's 'third way' between realism and idealism, and his creation and decreation to Heidegger's and Sartre's. There is no doubt that Stevens' poetry re-examines the relation between mind and matter, man and the world, man and his fictions, etc. Occasionally, Stevens also has a fling at the old philosophies and is concerned with the problem of human consciousness, perception; and description of reality. In poems like 'The Snow Man,' 'The Course of a Particular,' and 'Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself,' Stevens' intellectual inquiry into the nature of experience insists on the particular, rather than the general which is the realm of philosophy. But as Gregory cautions us, the value of Stevens' poetry cannot be measured in philosophical or intellectual terms. For though Stevens philosophizes in his poetry as well as prose essays, what he expresses in his poems is a poetic sensibility in a philosophical language.

Ambiguity and Obscurity

Because of the gaudiness of his language, his heterodox views, and his concern with reality and imagination, Stevens has been a difficult poet to understand. Obscurity is sometime caused by his very language in poems like 'Bantams in Pine-Woods,' his nonsense —syllables, use of rare, archaic and invented words for the meanings of which the reader is forced to run to the dictionary and often in vain. This verbal extravaganza is often accompanied by an ambiguity and complexity in the meaning conveyed. In this respect, R.P. Blackmoor's comment is worthy of mention. According to him, Stevens 'ambiguity is that of a substance so dense with being that it resists paraphrase and can be truly perceived only in the form of words in which it was given.' As an example, Blackmoor cites the beginning of Stevens' "Of the Manner of Addressing the Clouds" which runs as follows:

> Gloomy grammarians in golden gowns,
> Meekly you keep the mortal rendezvous,
> Eliciting the still sustaining pomps
> Of speech which are like music so profound
> They seem an exaltation without sound.
> Funest philosophers and ponderers,
> Their evocations are the speech of clouds.

Sometime sense, as much of it as is clear from the context, is concealed in strange images and metaphors which seem to make sense out of non-sense. Take, for example, the following lines from "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock".

People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
Only here and there, and old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots
Catches tigers
In red weather.

Here the problem is not with the language which is simple and decorative, yet the combination of words creates an obstacle to understanding. Even a simpler poem than this can contain an ambiguity which is hard to decipher: "The Virgin Carrying a Lantern" is a case in point:

There are no bears among the roses,
Only a negress who supposes
Things false and wrong

About the lantern of the beauty
Who walks, there, as a farewell duty,
Walks long and long.

The pity that her pious egress
Should fill the vigil of a negress
With heat so strong.

Stevens' language here creates no problem. The simple paraphrasable content of the poem would seem to be this: a virgin is going with a lantern at night, with no harm (or evil) in her mind, nor in the outside world, but a suspicious negress is filled with excitement that the girl is going for some amorous rendezvous! But as Howard Baker comments, "The poem is slightly ambiguous in that we are not told specifically why the virgin walks abroad with her lantern. . . . we may guess that the virgin is concerned with her state as a virgin and intends to part from it . . . The lines might have been called "two ways of looking at love." A similar ambiguity exists in another small poem "The Anecdote of the Jar," where ambiguity is the product of two clashing ideas, the order imposed by the human mind and the natural but beautiful and fertile wildernesses.

David Daiches in a recent study provides a valuable insight into the reason underlying ambiguity and obscurity in Stevens' poetry: "Sometimes it seems that Stevens is impelled to produce puzzles because that is part of the challenge to the poet in a universe that is meaningless without his response to it."

Conclusion

All the features noted above make Stevens a highly individual poetic genius of the twentieth century. This is why it is often difficult to compare him with other modern poets, or those of the past. Stevens in fact has a voice of his own which easily marks him out as an original poet and thinker, grapping with the issues of life in a language which is bare of traditional constructs, but decorated with the poet's own perceptions of reality as he sees and apprehends it. This makes Stevens a major poet of this century. □

3

The Dandyism of Wallace Stevens

When Wallace Stevens published his first collection of poems, *Harmonium*, in 1923 when he was already forty-four, critics were so surprised by his verbal pyrotechnics that they tended to dismiss him as a dandy. It was Gorham B. Munson who explored the dandiacal elements in Stevens' poetry in an appreciative rather than derogatory sense and sought to place him among other well-known dandies of literature. In his monograph on *Wallace Stevens* William York Tindall also called Stevens a dandy and placed him side by side with the Restoration fop Regency Brummell, Aubrey Beardsley, Oscar Wilde in Piccadilly, and Whistler at 10 O'clock in Chelsea, all of whom according to Tindall, "were dandies and all decorators of something like a nigger cemetery". It is necessary, therefore, to understand what the term dandyism, as applied to poets and writers, means.

Definition of Dandyism

The French poet Baudelaire, who was proud to call himself a dandy, described dandyism in the following words: "Dandyism is above all a burning need to acquire originality, within the apparent bounds of convention. It is a sort of cult of oneself, which can dispense even with what are commonly called illusions. It is the delight in causing astonishment, and the proud satisfaction of never oneself being astonished. . . . Dandyism is the last gleam of heroism in times of decadence". According to William York Tindall, dandyism is "a comment on the commonplace and the quotidian," and that it reveals these by their opposites. Revealing time and place, reworking fact, dandies display 'the unreal of what is real' and, conversely, 'the real of what is unreal.' Tindall adds that "Keeping things as they are in mind, the dandy of our time responds not only to bourgeois society but to the nature exposed by science. Unnatural decorations suit his black continuum. But dandyism is unsuitable, too, as the department of Fragonard, all right at Fontainebleau, would violate Asylum Street. At once inappropriate and appropriate, dandyism depends on the interaction of opposites." According to Roger Shattuck, Dandyism is 'clenched Romanticism' which replaced the 'lyric tone'. He adds that an "icy

and elegant manner barely revealed the flame within", as conventionalized emotion was replaced by "a calculus of feeling."

The above cited views reveal several features of dandyism in literature. Just as dandyism in dress and manners depends on a certain element of exceptionalness, dandyism in literature attempts at a deliberate departure from what is traditional, commonplace and quotidian. Secondly, dandyism challenges traditional attitudes towards morality and concept of religion and godhead. Thirdly, dandyism surprises and shocks by being offensive in its wit and irony. The purpose is to offend smug attitudes. Finally, as in matters of dress, dandyism aims at something novel, mannered and polished and yet something exceptional in respect of style and diction. But most important features of dandyism, according to Gorham B. Munsom, are correctness and elegance: "Both elements transcend merely good taste, for correctness implies a knowledge of the rules governing the modes of expression, feeling, thinking, conduct; elegance is, of course, good taste that has been polished." Without these, dandyism cannot have the effect that it aims at producing.

Stevens as a Dandy

When one examines Stevens' poetry in the light of the above criteria, Stevens is a dandy in certain respects but the very opposite of a dandy in certain others. His shyness, reticence and shunning of publicity are not the traits that belong to dandyism which is, after all, exhibitionist in character. Wallace Stevens did not allow a guest at the Hartford Canoe Club to discuss poetry with him. In fact he kept his poetic avocation so much of a secret in the insurance world that a fellow-executive of his was amazed to hear that Stevens was an important modern poet. Kreymborg is on record having said that when Stevens sent him the manuscript of 'Peter Quince at the Clavier,' he made a hasty proviso: "I must ask you not to breathe a word about this. Print it if you like; send it back if you don't." Secondly, though a dandy in his dress—he was quite finicky about his suits and neckties—Stevens hardly had a public self. Even when he was invited to address academic gatherings he spoke in a half-inaudible, unaccented tone and without any peculiar mannerism, things which immediately set off a dandy from the rest. Thirdly, it needs to be added that it is largely in his *Harmonium* that Stevens deliberately adopts some of the masks, and style and diction which belong to a dandy; in his later poetry, his style and vocabulary are relatively plain. Any consideration of Stevens' dandyism, therefore, must begin with this kind of qualification.

Once these facts are kept in mind, Stevens, at least in his *Harmonium*, can be seen as a modern dandy in respet of most features of dandyism. As Daniel Fuchs remarks, "Although Wallace Stevens dandyism is more muted, wry, and less intense

than Baudelaire's—even Baudelaire's dandyism did not measure up to all of his utterances about it—it does share the qualities of deflationary assault, disillusion, icy elegance, oddity, uniqueness self-conscious absorption, the desire to astonish, and a new, complex, and in some sense bizarre means of expression". Look at the following poem, 'Bantams in Pine-Wood', for example:

> Chieftain Iffucaan of Azcan in caftan
> Of tan with henna hackles, halt!
>
> Damned universal cock, as if the sun
> Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.
>
> Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.
> Your world is you, I am my world.
>
> You ten-foot poet among inchlings. Fat!
> Begone! An inchling bristles in these pines,
>
> Bristles, and points their Appalachian tangs,
> And fears not portly Azcan nor his hoos.

The poem is dazzling because of its syntax, its diction, and is comic because of its situation as one cock tries to shoo off another. And it gains in richness when one takes Azcan as a symbol of imagination and the persona as a symbol of reality.

Oddity

Stevens' poetry, especially in *Harmonium*, shows the oddity that is characteristic of a dandy. His poem 'The Weeping Burgher' is one such oddity which may describe even the position of a poet-dandy. A middle-class citizen, busy in earning and spending, becomes odd when he feels alienated from his class by aspiring to an aristocratic aesthetic taste in which he himself finds hard to believe:

> It is with strange malice
> That I distort the world.
>
> Ah! that ill humours
> Should mask as white girls.
> And ah! that Scaramouche
> Should have a black barouche.
>
> The sorry verities!
> Yet in excess, continual,
> There is cure of sorrow.

This oddity often extends to the description of situations which traditionally call for a different response. In 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream', for example, Stevens creates a situation which should normally make one think of the life beyond, and yet Stevens insists on an attitude altogether different and matter-of-fact:

Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Capacity to Give Offence

Stevens, like a dandy, takes sheer delight in giving offence to our traditional responses by taking a position which is the contrary of what is expected. 'The Emperor of Ice Cream' is a case in point. But there are many more. In 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', Stevens makes fun of an old pious woman by saying:

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms,
Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
We agree in principle. That's clear. But take
The opposing law and make a peristyle,
And from the peristyle project a masque
Beyond the planets.

Similarly, the metaphysicians come for the same treatment in 'The Glass of Water' when Stevens mimics their pedagogic style:

That the glass would melt in heat,
That the water would freeze in cold,
Shows that this object is merely a state
One of many, between two poles. So,
In the metaphysical, there are these poles.

Elegance

Elegance and correctness, as Munson emphasizes, are the chief characteristics of a dandy in literature. Stevens is never lacking in either. Even in 'Bantams in Pinewoods', correctness and elegance are there despite the uncommon diction which verges on the bizarre. Most of the time Stevens attains this elegance through his fastidious vocabulary—in the surprising aplomb and blandness of his diction. As Gorhman B. Munson has shown, "He [Stevens] will say 'harmonium' instead of 'small organ', 'lacustrine' instead of 'lakeside', 'sequin' instead of 'spangle'; he will speak of 'hibiscus', 'panche', 'fabliau' and 'poor buffo'. The whole tendency of his vocabulary is, in fact toward the lightness and coolness and transparency of French. And yet, none of the words that Stevens uses is there for the sake of bedazzlement. "The important thing

about Mr Stevens' vocabulary", remarks R.P. Blackmur, "is not the apparent oddity of certain words, but the uses to which he puts those words with others. It is the way that Mr Stevens combines kinds of words, unusual in a single context, to reveal the substance he had in mind, which is of real interest to the reader".

Stevens often uses words, even coins them, to convey the precise meaning and to create the effect that he wishes to create. In the following example from "Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds", the word *funest* is used in such a manner that it can combine the sense of *funeral* with that of *fun* or that of a pompous funeral since it is used in such a situation:

Gloomy grammarians in golden gowns
Meekly you keep the mortal rendezvous,
Eliciting the still sustaining pomps
Of speech which are like music so profound
They seem an exaltation without sound.
Funest philosophers and ponderers,
Their evocations are the speeches of the clouds.

Somewhat similar is the case with another word that Stevens has coined: *floribund*. The word is not found in the dictionaries, but it is the right word to combine simultaneously the sense of something flowery and moribund.

Wit, Irony and Self-Mockery

Another characteristic feature of dandyism which Stevens displays is that of wit and self-mockery. In 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,' for example, Stevens indulges in self-caricature when he describes this French uncle and his monocular vision:

"Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon,
There is nothing, no, no, never nothing,
Like the clashed edges of two words that kill."
And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.
Or was it that I mocked myself alone?
I wish that I might be a thinking stone.

As Daniel Fuchs remarks, "If the poem is an inversion of elevated passion, it is also a tumultously weary comment about the loss of this passion . . . These lines, in their progression from highest ethereal being to lowest corporeal being, are the self-conscious expression of a dandy who knows that effusions of passion are embarrassing and ludicrous, and that the lack of them threatens dehumanization". Stevens' mask of wit and self-mockery here saves the poem from creating the impression that Prufrock createsl: for the French uncle is aware of what Prufrock is not.

Iconoclasm

Stevens, like every dandy of literature, believes in challenging the accepted ideals, even gods. In 'Ploughing on Sunday', for example, his praise of life and gaiety becomes irreverent in the context that Sunday is used for prayer and worship:

> Remus, blow your horns!
> I'm ploughing on Sunday,
> Ploughing North America.
> Blow your horn!
>
> Tum-ti-tum,
> Ti-tum-tum-tum!
> The turkey-cock's tail
> Spreads to the sun.

In 'Sunday Morning', the poet questions the Christian lady's feelings of regret for not having been in a church:

> Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
> The silken weavings of our afternoons,
> And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!
> Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
> Within those burning bosom we devise
> Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

Similarly, in 'Lions in Sweden', he discards the old souvenirs:

> No more phrases, Swenson: I was once
> A hunter of those sovereigns of the soul
> And savings banks.

In 'Evening without Angels', he again questions the relevance of old myths and religious symbols:

> Is there any secret in skulls,
> The cattle skulls in the woods?
> Do the drummers in black hoods
> Rumble anything out of their drums?

Gaiety of Language

Stevens is no less a dandy in his use of language which is characterized by a certain gaudiness, decoration, and charm. Though in a poem like 'The Snow Man' he insists that one must have a mind of winter to perceive the wintry landscape and express in a language that is bare of rhetoric, the fact remains that Stevens shows a rare delight in the use of words and phrases which have a decorative purpose. His 'Floral Decorations for Bananas' is a case in point:

Well, nuncle, this plainly won't do.
These insolent, linear peels
And sullen, hurricane shapes
Won't do with your eglantine.
They require something serpentine.
Blunt yellow in such a room!

As Susan Weston has noted, "Language is the tool of the resemblance-seeking mind, and *Harmonium* is Stevens' most self-consciously 'linguistic' volume, dramatizing what Stevens articulated only much later" :

Natives of poverty, children of malheur,
The gaiety of language is our seigneur.

A poem like 'The Load of Sugarcane' is built solely on the basis of analogy, which is a sheer linguistic delight. Stevens' love for fine clothes also extends to his love for linguistic decoration: nonsense syllables, radical diction, wide-ranging analogies, and equivocally adopted figures of speech.

But it needs to be emphasized that this gaiety of language comes from choice and is not entirely dependent on the choice of diction. Stevens can be very powerful and evocative even when he writes in plain language, as so often he does in his later poetry. In a poem like 'Clear Day and No Memories', for example, the feeling of nothingness that the poet conveys from plain language:

No soldiers in the scenery
No thoughts of people now dead,
As they were fifty years ago,
Young and living in a live air,
Young and walking in the sunshine,
Bending in blue dresses to touch something,
Today the mind is not part of the weather.

Not even a single word used here is odd, gaudy, or decorative, and yet the impact this poem creates is exceptionally powerful.

Conclusion

The label of a dandy is not applicable to Stevens through and through, though it is a clear dandyism that characterizes much of the verse in *Harmonium*. Secondly, Stevens' tone keeps on changing; sometime he takes sheer delight in being playful, funny, odd, and witty; but at other times, he does so in order to go to the heart of the matter and explore the reality as it is. The word 'dandy', therefore, has a limited application to Stevens: he is a dandy to the extent dandyism is something which is part of modern poetry, and more significantly, when it helps him question or mock some of the traditional attitudes. And finally, if he sounds odd at times, his oddness comes from his originality of thought and expression both of which laugh at what is commonplace and quotidian.

4

Wallace Stevens' Affinities with Romantics

Though Wallace Stevens is unquestionably a modern poet grappling in his poetry with the issues which confront the moderns, yet in several respects he is so close to the Romantics, especially the British Romantic poets, that some critics have gone to the extent of calling him an heir of the Romantics. As Daniel Fuchs has observed, in the positive sense of the word 'Romantic', Stevens "is himself a romantic, himself a chauvinist of the self. It was the romantics who proclaimed their faith in the sustaining and ennobling power of the imagination and in the reality of the world. It was the romantics too who sought a oneness between man and the natural world, making knowledge something real rather than something certain". Moreover, in his questioning of traditional beliefs and of modes of poetry, and in his love for nature and the emphasis on man as an individual, all Stevens is very close to the Romantics Stevens himself did not have any objection to his being called a romantic, provided the word was used in a special sense which he defined in his comments on Miss Moore's poetry:

> The romantic in the pejorative sense merely connotes obsolescence, but that word has, or should have, another sense . . . [The] romantic in its other sense, meaning always the living and at the same time the imaginative, the youthful, the delicate and a variety of things which it is not necessary to try to particularize at the moment, constitutes the vital element in poetry. It is absurd to wince at being called a romantic poet. Unless one is that one is not a poet at all. That, of course, does not mean banyans and frangipani; and it cannot for long mean no banyans and no frangipani. Just what it means Miss Moore's book discloses. It means, now-a-days, an uncommon intelligence. It means in a time like our own of violent feelings equally violent feelings and the most skilfull expression of the genuine. (from *Opus Posthumous*)

But at the same time, Stevens had no use for what he called the obsolescence of the romantics. In this theory of imagination, he clearly wrote about the decadence of the romantics, especially in connection with their concept of imagination:

> We must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic. We feel, without being particularly intelligent about it, that the imagination as metaphysics will survive logical positivism unscathed. At the same time, we feel, and with the sharpest possible intelligence, that it is not worthy to survive if it is to be identified with the romantic. The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty. It is a failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is a failure of feeling. The imagination is the only genius. It is intrepid and eager and the extreme of its achievement lies in abstraction. The achievement of the romantic, on the contrary, lies in minor wish-fulfilments and it is incapable of abstraction. (from *The Necessary Angel*).

Stevens' relationship with the romantics is thus a strange love-hate relationship: he does not hesitate to be called a romantic if the word is used in the positive sense as he himself has defined it, but he is against facile philosophizing, sentimentality and the failure of the imagination (in the sense he uses this phrase in the quotation from *The Necessary Angel*) which often characterize romantic poets. But the similarities and difference between Stevens and the Romantics are more profound than what the above outline suggests. Let us now analyse, separately, his similarities and dissimilarities with the romantics, with illustrations from his own poems.

Similarities

Imagination—In all his poetry Stevens, like the romantics, lays great emphasis on the supremacy of the imagination over human reason. Imagination for him is a kind of belief, like all other beliefs. But whereas the imaginative constructs of religion and philosophy are suspect in his eyes, the world created by imagination is not. Even the supreme fiction in which he believes is a product of imagination, arrived at by an interaction of the imagination with reality. In his concept of imagination Stevens is quite close to Coleridge. For Coleridge, as both John Shawcross and Diane Wood Middlebrook in their separate studies emphasize, imagination is the power that allows the individual mind to achieve a synthesis which involves all the individual's resources of feeling and thought. Imagination, according to Coleridge, can be divided into two phases: First is the abstracting phase in which stimuli are withdrawn from nature into the personal individual. The second phase is that of symbol-

making in which synthesis takes place between the universal and the particular elements. In "It Must Give Pleasure" of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, says Middlebrook, Stevens' insistence on the unity of the male and the female principles is equivalent to the primary and the secondary aspects of imagination in Coleridge's theory. The main difference between Coleridge's concept of imagination and Stevens' is this: Coleridge tends to relate imagination to the supernatural, but Stevens refuses to do so. In his eyes, imagination is something this-worldly and has nothing to do with the supernatural. But comparison between the theories is quite strong; for, as William Van O'Connor demonstrates, both Coleridge and Stevens oppose any dichotomy between imagination and the rationalist mind; both think of imagination as a way of establishing communion with nature; and both use light (of moon, and the stars) as symbols for the imagination.

Description of and Interest in Nature

One other remarkable feature that Stevens' poetry shares with the Romantics' is the description of and interest in nature. Stevens' descriptions of natural scenes and of joy in nature often approximate Wordsworth's and his blank verse also reaches the same intensity. In "The Idea of Order at Key West," for example, Stevens gives a beautiful description of the scene near the sea-port:

> The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
> As the night descended, tilting in the air,
> Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
> Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
> Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Or, take the following extract from "Sunday Morning":

> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

As J. V. Cunningham has pointed out, the positive argument of "Sunday Morning," is almost as traditional in the history of English poetry and in the literary situation of Stevens' youth; it is, with the important difference of a hundred years and the denial of immortality, Wordsworthian in idea, in detail, in feeling, and in rhetoric." Cunningham then quotes a passage from Wordsworth to show the similarity in feeling and rhetoric between "Sunday Morning" and Wordsworth's descriptions of nature:

What want we? have we not perpetual streams,
Warm woods, and sunny hills, and fresh green fields,
And mountains not less green, and flocks and herds,
And thickets full of songsters, and the voice
Of lordly birds, an unexpected sound
Heard now and then from morn to latest eve.
Admonishing the man who walks below
Of solitude and silence in the sky?

Stevens' "The Comedian as the Letter C" is similarly close to Wordsworth's *Recluse*, and so is Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Harold Bloom, commenting on "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" sees in Stevens a direct descendant of the romantics. According to Bloom, Stevens mixes the modes of quest romance and poetry of vision in order to describe a poet withdrawing himself from the world into fabricated fictions. For this reason Bloom describes "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" as not only "purely romantic," but also "the supreme achievement of post-Romanticism." There is, however, one important difference between Wordsworth and Stevens: Though Stevens delights in nature as much as Wordsworth, he sees no immortal, transcendent power in it. His attitude is rather like the attitude of Coleridge who, in his Dejection Ode wrote:

Lady we receive, but what we give
In our life alone doth Nature live.

Relation Between Man and the World

In yet another respect Stevens is quite close to Wordsworth and other romantics: his belief in the interrelatedness of man and his universe. In the work of both poets, remarks Huston, "the universe containing and contained in the consciousness of the observer is perceived directly without any mediating figure between the poet and the visible concrete natural world. Both the poets turn to a merger to earth and imagination to provide the possibilities of creation that transcend the usual limits of time and space. Stevens, like Wordsworth, is usually concerned with the relationship of the perceiving mind to the external world of nature. In Stevens' 'Credences of Summer' as much as in Wordsworth's 'The Recluse', the mind and the external reality are interdependent. Stevens, according to Kenneth Fields, confronts the nineteenth-century problems of the mind's and the world's relationship. He believes in thought and the mind as the last refuge from reality, and reflects nineteenth-century values in his 'poetry of nostalgia' which expresses a desire for what he cannot have.

The Romantic Rebel

In this attitude towards traditional poetry and poetics, and ideas about man and nature, Stevens emerges as a kind of romantic

rebel. He questions the supremacy of traditional beliefs and exhorts his readers to return to direct, personal experience. In poetic form too, he makes several innovations even as he incorporates Wordsworthian blank verse. In many of his poems which deal with his theory of poetry, Stevens grapples with the precise relation between poetry and tradition on the one hand, and between poetry and the world, on the other. His insistence on a 'supreme fiction' does not ignore the premise that his too is a 'fiction', willingly believed in. In his definition of the romantic rebel—and he includes himself in this category—Stevens says that a romantic rebel is one who dwells in the ivory tower which nonetheless affords him a view of the public dump. But, as Kathleen McGrory has observed, Stevens' romanticism is not a detached idealism; nor is his rebellion a sterile rejection. For being an agnostic rather than a transcendentalist, Stevens believes in the reality of this world and emphasizes the need for the interrelation between reality and imagination.

Dissimilarities

Though Stevens' poetry has definite echoes of romantic poets, and his poetic theory, especially on the role of imagination, is also close to Coleridge's, there are also remarkable differences. Stevens himself is fully aware of these differences. This is why even as he speaks of the necessity of interaction between imagination and reality, he is also aware of the fact that the two are separate. In a poem, like 'The Snow Man', for example, Stevens emphasizes the need to see reality as it is, bare of all imaginative projections that the human mind is capable of bestowing upon a wintry landscape:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow . . . .

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Similarly, in 'Sunday Morning', and his even more iconoclastic 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', Stevens emphasizes the need for discarding traditional constructs of human imagination. Reality according to Stevens, must be accepted along with its evil and suffering. This is his central concern in an important later poem, 'Esthetique du mal'. Secondly, Stevens does recognize the pressure of reality that may be so heavy on imagination that the latter may even cease to function. In 'The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad', which has been compared with Coleridge's Dejection Ode, Stevens is overwhelmed by the unbearable burden of reality:

The time of year has grown indifferent.
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow
Are both alike in the routine I know.
I am too dumbly in my being pent.
The wind attendant on the solstices
Blows on the shutters of the metropoles,
Stirring no poet in his sleep, and tolls
The grand ideas of the village.

Moreover, it is on this kind of harsh reality that imagination must work. In 'Man with the Blue Guitar' Stevens writes:

At last, in spite of his manner, his eye
A-cock at the cross-piece on a pole
Supporting heavy cables, slung

Though Oxidia, banal suburb,
One-half of all its installments paid.

Dew-dapper clapper-traps, blazing
From crusty stacks above machines.

Ecce, Oxidia is the seed
Dropped out of this amber-ember pod,

Oxidia is the soot of fire,
Oxidia is Olympia.

Commenting on this passage Stevens says, "The necessity is to evolve a man from modern life—from Oxidia, not Olympia, since Oxidia is our only Olympia". Stevens thus never tries to retreat to the imaginitive world of the nightingale because the pressure of the world of 'fever and fret' is too strong to bear.

Again, if Stevens' poetry at times compares with Wordsworth's, there is also a basic difference which virtually nullifies the comparison. As James Baird writes, *The Prelude*, taken singly, may have been demonstrative for Stevens. To record in poetry the structure of a mind is a supreme act. Yet the method of *The Prelude*, *the building up* (the Wordsworthian 'growth of mind') in a Platonic progression, of reality transcending earlier reality, of absolute spiritual identity finally dismissing the synthesis of sense impression, is foreign to every objective of Stevens". The same applies to his theory of imagination in relation to Coleridge's. Comparing and contrasting these two theorists of imagination, Baird writes, "Certainly the imagination known to Stevens establishes correspondences; it fuses the data of the senses; it compels the similar from the dissimilar; through synthesis it achieves a poetic reality. In the terminology of Stevens, this synthesis is the process of imagination at work upon things made ideas. It seems to me ill advised to cite these attributes of imagination as proof of Steve--' dependence upon, let us say, the *Biographia Literaria*. . . .

If one must consider influence at all, would not the aesthetics of Hegel have served Stevens equally well?"

Conclusion

It is largely Stevens' insistence on the role of imagination that links him with the Romantics. But as noted above, Stevens denies any transcendent and supernatural power to imagination. Secondly, he combines imagination with reality, even quotidian reality, and would at times prefer to have a mind of winter rather than rely on Olympian imagination to escape the realities of the world. Thirdly, the order that imagination imposes on reality is, according to Stevens' belief, temporary, rather than permanent or transcendental. In 'The Idea of Order at Key West', for example, the order imposed by the girl's music on the incoherent sound of the sea is an imaginative order, but there is nothing permanent or supernatural about it. This is also true of Stevens' theory of 'supreme fiction', : it is to be a fiction, not a sùbstitute for reality.

Secondly, Stevens is every inch a modern poet in his use of images, symbols and verse forms. Even when he takes resources to a traditional verse form, blank verse for example, he creates something new, as in 'Sunday Morning', and 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman'. Old forms are used to create an entirely different form, or, as in case of "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm' a new metrical form is attained out of the inveterate violation of the old. Thus, though Stevens may call himself a romantic in the extended and positive sense of the term, the fact remains that he is an imortant *modern* poet dealing with modernist problems in verse forms are also modern. □

5

Stevens' Theory of Imagination and Reality

'God and the imagination are one', wrote Wallace Stevens. This statement shows the key position that imagination occupies in his poetry and poetic theory. In *The Necessary Angel* Stevens expresses himself on the subject of imagination thus:

> The imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos. . . . The truth seems to be that we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them. If this is true, then reason is simply the methodizer of the imagination. It may be that the imagination is a miracle of logic and that its exquisite divinations are calculations beyond analysis, as the conclusions of reason are calculations wholly within analysis. If so, one understands perfectly the remark that 'in the service of love and imagination nothing can be too lavish, too sublime or too festive.'

For Stevens thus, the imagination is the power that orders the chaos and is prior to reason, which is simply the 'methodizer of the imagination'. The point can be suitably illustrated from his two poems 'Anecdote of the Jar', and 'The Idea of Order at Key West'. In the former poem, it is a bare, barren jar, a man-made artifact and symbol of imagination, which orders the chaotic wildernesses of Tennessee when it is placed atop a hill in their midst. In 'The Idea of Order at Key West' it is the solitary singer's music which orders the uncontrolled, formless music of the sea and thereby creates an imaginative order:

> It was her voice that made
> The sky acutest at its vanishing.
> She measured to the hour its solitude.
> She was the single artificer of the world
> In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
> Whatever self it had, became the self
> That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
> As we beheld her striding there alone,
> Knew that there never was a world for her
> Except the one she sang, and, singing, made.

Comparison with Coleridge's Theory of Imagination

His belief in the ordering power of imagination brings Stevens quite close to Coleridge. Both think of imagination as a power that allows the individual mind to attain a state of integration involving all of the individual's resources of feeling and thought; both oppose as dichotomies the imagination and the rationlist mind; both view the imagination as a way of establishing communion with nature; and both employ light, particularly the moon and the stars, as symbols for imagination. But unlike Coleridge, Stevens does not think of imagination as an organ or faculty. Most significant, he does not invest imagination with any supernatural or transcendent powers. Stevens' concept of imagination is purely secular and this-worldly. 'Beyond earth he will not project himself', and for him 'there was no fury in transcendent forms'. Nor does Stevens share Coleridge's view that the powers of imagination were denied to the 'sensual and the proud'.

What is more, Stevens himself distinguishes his theory of imagination with that of the Romantic poets. He writes:

> We must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic. We feel, without being particularly intelligent about it, that the imagination as metaphysics will survive logical positivism unscathed. At the same time, we feel, and with the sharpest possible intelligence, that it is not worthy to survive if it is to be identified with the romantic. The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is a failure of feeling. The imagination is the only genius. It is intrepid and eager and the extreme of its achievement lies in abstraction. The achievement of the romantic, on the contrary, lies in minor wish-fulfillments and it is incapable of abstraction. (*The Necessary Angel*, p. 138)

Obstacles in the way of Imagination

The romantic idea of imagination, in the pejorative sense of the word 'romantic', is, according to Stevens, one main obstacle to the realizing of the full power of imagination. The romantic attitude errs, says Stevens, through a tendency to identify the ideal life of imagination with the whole life of reality. But the life of the imagination is for ever transcending the reality from which it obtains its life, for ever composing and constantly outliving an ideal that is not quite life—"and yet the ideal itself remains alive with an enormous life".

Another major obstacle in the functioning of imagination, according to Stevens, comes from traditional religion. As he himself wrote, "Poetry does not address itself to beliefs. Nor could

it ever invent an ancient world full of figures that had been known and become endeared to the readers for centuries." His reason for the rejection of traditional religion and myths, as C. Roland Wagner puts it, is this: "The 'invisible truths' which men have upheld on faith must give way to truths of the 'visible' in acts of disciplined imagination: we must believe that 'the visible is the equivalent of the 'invisible'. Then the 'false imagination' will be destroyed and religion may be judged as we judged poetry: 'not so much that it is actually so as that it must be so'—not so much that God actually exists, as that He is a moral necessity based on contingent experience." This is the idea expressed much more forcefully in 'Sunday Morning' in which the Christian lady is exhorted to reject traditional religion and opt for one that is based on the 'visible' rather than the 'invisible':

> Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
> What is divinity if it can come
> Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
> Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
> In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
> In any balm or beauty of the earth,
> Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
> Divinity must like within herself:
> Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow:
> Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued. . . .
> These are the measures destined for her soul.

Similarly, in another iconoclastic poem, 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', the imaginative construct of poetry is preferable to that of traditional religion:

> Take the moral law and make a nave of it
> And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
> The conscience is converted into palms,
> Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
> We agree in principle. That's clear. But take.
> The opposing law and make a peristyle,
> And from the peristyle project a masque
> Beyond the planets.

Both the 'haunted heaven' built by the moral law and the 'peristyle' built by the opposing law (poetry as supreme fiction) are after all products of the imagination; but the important difference between the two consists in the fact that whereas the former is based on the old and invisible, the latter is based on the present, concrete and visible.

Yet another barrier in the functioning of imagination is the positivism of some received system of morality and philosophy. The positivist, a Wagner has pointed out, "holds that the imagination as metaphysics cannot express the literal truth about reality; it

can only image the emotions of the metaphysician: Stevens observes that 'the imagination as metaphysics, from the point of view of logical positivist, has at least seeming values" and that the literal truth itself is valueless until, through the imagination, it uses in a concrete seeming for the mind". Stevens shows a similar attitude towards Freudian psychology and Marxism. All myths, old beliefs, and systems of thoughts even images of poetry are, for Stevens, the articles placed on the heap of dump since they have lost their power of communicating anything in the modern world. This is how he describes these things in 'The Man on the Dump':

> The dump is full
> Of images. Days pass like papers from a press.
> The bouquets come here in the papers. So the sun,
> And so the moon, both come, and the janitor's poems
> Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,
> The Cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box
> From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea.
> . . . .
> One grows to hate these things except in the dump.

Furthermore, Stevens is opposed not only to traditional beliefs and metaphysics but also to false imagination, or an imagination which can only temporarily transform the reality. In 'The Ordinary Women', for example, the lives of these children of poverty is momentarily enlivened when they let loose their fancy:

> They flung monotony behind,
> Turned from their want, and, nonchalant,
> They crowded
> The nocturnal halls.
>
> The lacquered loges huddled there
> Mumbled zay-zay and a-zay, a-zay,
> The moonlight
> Fubbed the girandoles.

But the imaginations of these women are too active for them and they soon return to the world of their throat ailments and poverty:

> Then from their poverty they rose,
> From dry guitars, and to catarrhs
> They flitted
> Through the palace walls.

Similarly, Stevens is against imagination gone stale. In 'Delightful Evening', for example, the Doktor who emotes about the "spruces' outstretched hands" and indulges in similar other cliches of romantic imagination ends up by showing that his imagination is stale and therefore a caricature of imagination:

A very felictious eye,
A Herr Doktor and that's enough
Though the bro in your palm may grieve

At the vernacular of light
(Omitting reefs of cloud);
Empurpled garden grass;

The spruces' outstretched hands;
The twilight overfull
Of wormy metaphors.

Imagination and Reality

Stevens' own concept of imagination is based on a strong acceptance of reality, and for its understanding, its separation of reality at times. One must look at reality afresh without any projections that the human mind is capable of investing reality with. In 'The Snow Man', Stevens emphasises the need to have a mind of 'winter' to look at reality and nothing else:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind
In the sound of a few leaves , . .

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

It is such a close contact with reality which can purify the imagination and rid it of its old conceptions. Stevens admits that sometimes the pressure of reality may be too much to bear and may lead to a total failure of the imagination. But that is something to be borne rather than coloured with false imagination. This is the theme which finds adequate expression in 'The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad', a poem which has rightly been compared with Coleridge's Dejection Ode:

The time of year has grown indifferent.
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow
Are both alike in the routine I know.
I am too dumbly in my being pent.

The wind attendant on the solastices
Blows on the shutters of the metropoles,
Stirring no poet in his sleep, and tolls
The grand ideas of the villages.

Here the power of the poet's imagination is dissipated in face of the depressing flux of daily routine, the malady of the quotidian. As Daniel Fuchs remarks, "Stifling though the malady of the quotidian may be, Stevens does not remain discouraged. He is not one to save the imagination by escaping reality. When he says that 'the imagination has the strength of reality or none at all', he is saying that reality is to be mastered by the imagination as well as endured'. The true romantic poet, a votary of the true imagination, according to Stevens, "happens to be one who still dwells in the ivory tower, but who insists that life would be intolerable except for the fact that one has, from the top, such an exceptional view of the public dump and the advertising signs of Snider's Catsup, Ivory Soap and Chevrolet Cars; he is the hermit who dwells alone with the sun and moon, but insists on taking a rotten newspaper" (*Opus Posthumous*, p. 256).

Secondly, Stevens' concept of reality is such that it can accommodate change and mortality, the life in flux. In 'The Emperor of Ice Cream' Stevens refuses to sentimentalize about death and insists on the reality of the flux by saying:

Let be be finale of seem,
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Similarly, in this more ambitious and later poem 'Esthétique du Mal', Stevens sees imaginative riches in the recognition of man's essential poverty. In 'Sunday Morning' he accepts death as the mother of beauty:

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

In fact Stevens' whole theory of aesthetics takes into account the fact of man's transience, poverty and mortality. Stevens' theory of imagination takes this aspect of reality into consideration and it is one important aspect in which it differs from the traditional concept of imagination: for Stevens, a new order emerges out of

an interaction of reality and imagination, not through that imagination which seeks to escape reality. For Stevens it is the union of the two, the reality and the imagination, which provides a genuinely perceptive moment. This is what he says about this subject in his "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":

> Two things of opposite nature seem to depend
> On one another, as a man depends
> On a woman, day on night, the imagined
> On the real. This is the origin of change.
> Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
> And forth the particulars of rapture come.

And imagination, says Stevens in "Man with the Blue Guitar," must be able to re-create an Olympia out of Oxidia, since, as he said, "Oxidia is our only Olympia":

> At last, in spite of his manner, his eye,
>
> A-cock at the cross-piece on a pole
> Supporting heavy cables, slung
>
> Through Oxidia, banal suburb,
> One-half of all its installments paid.
> . . .Ecce, Oxidia is the seed
> Dropped out of this amber-ember pod,
>
> Oxidia is the soot of fire,
> Oxidia is Olympia.

To conclude, though Stevens sometime favours plain reality and sometimes pure imagination—"Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time, and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that" —the fact is that he believes in a fusion and interdependence of the two. As Professor Pack succinctly remarks, "Stevens' reality is dependent on the imagination for its realization; and the imagination, as part of a greater reality, is dependent upon itself for realization." It is the interaction between imagination and reality which is the source of constant pleasure because it makes us feel an integral part of our existence:

> And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf
> Above the table spins its constant spin,
> So that we look at it with pleasure, look
> At it spinning its eccentric measure.

□

6

Tradition and Modernity in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

The Terms "Tradition" and "Modernity"

Tradition, according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, means the handing down of opinions, beliefs, and customs from ancestors to posterity. In poetry, the term tradition means the values, attitudes, images, symbols, myths, and verse forms that have come down to us from older poets. Since English poetry has been a continuous process since Geoffrey Chaucer, it cannot be said to have just one tradition. When John Donne wrote his "metaphysical" poetry, he attacked the tradition of Petrarchan sonneteers which was in vogue in his time. The kind of tradition that Wordsworth attacked in his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" was the Augustan vogue in poetry, with its emphasis on order, reason, restraint, decorum, and the artificial diction and the overused couplet form. Similarly, T.S. Eliot in the twentieth century found fault with the 'dissociation of sensibility' which had begun after the poetry of Donne and was to be found in abundance in the poetry of the romantics. Eliot himself returned to .he tradition of John Donne and other metaphysical poets.

The term *modernity* is used in two senses. The first is related to simply time and refers to something of very recent origin. In the second sense, it means a certain sets of beliefs and verse forms which recent poets have emphasized in their poetry, especially in respect of their difference from the inherited tradition. In this second sense, Donne, Wordsworth, Coleridge, T.S. Eliot, Walt Whitman were modern poets because they chose to defy the tradition and tried to create something which was new for their time. In this second meaning, modernity in poetry need not have anything to do with contemporaneity. Edwin Arlington Robinson, Yvor Winters and J. V. Cunningham belong to the modern time but are traditional poets because the kind of poetry they write is part of the older tradition.

Wallace Stevens, on the other hand, is modern in both senses of the term *modernity* because not only is his poetry of recent times but it also shares with contemporary poetry what can be called the

modern poetic sensibility. Speaking on this second aspect of Stevens' poetry, the remarks of Daniel Fuchs are worth quoting in some detail because they not only specify what is modern in Stevens's poetry but also suggest in what modernity in poetry consists: "It [Stevens' poetry] is concerned with the breakdown of belief, the moral wasteland, the pressure of materialistic realities on the life of the imagination. Twentieth century poetry is largely a difficult poetry appealing to a relatively small audience of presumbly discriminating readers. It has had to confront the attitudes of a society which is largely antipathetic to poetry and therefore shares with absolute modern poetry a resistance of taste and belief which is the given circumstance of its inception. The absolute modern of the twentieth century is perhaps the modern poet par excellence, since no other poet has encountered the attitudes of the past with such a total response, a past which has never been more ubiquitous as a cultural presence, whether as a challenge, as in Eliot, or a comedy, as in Stevens". Many other critics are, however, quite divided on Stevens' claims to modernity or his relation to anyone of the inherited traditions.

The Influence of Different Poetic Traditions on Stevens

Since Stevens wrote in the twentieth century, it would be wrong to say that only one out of the many inherited poetic traditions played a part in shaping his poetry. Let us, therefore, briefly consider the correspondences between his poetry and the poetry of the past.

Stevens and Metaphysical Poetry

There is no gainsaying the fact that like the poetry of T.S. Eliot and many other modern poets, Stevens' poetry is predominantly intellectual and in this respect it shows the unification of sensibility which T.S. Eliot found in Donne and other metaphysical poets. Emphasizing the difference between the metaphysical poets and other English poets between Donne and Browning, Eliot wrote:

> The difference is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning: it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thoughts as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility.

Now Stevens' poetry shows this quality—"a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a re-creation of thought into feeling"—in abundance. Of course, thevalue of his poetry cannot be measured in intellectual terms alone, the fact remains that it cannot either be understood in terms of sheer sensibility. Stevens' ambitious 'Notes

Toward a Supreme Fiction' shows this quality of his poetry fully. But even some minor pieces like 'Asides on the Oboe' sufficiently respresent this quality. This small poem is basically a poem about belief:

> The philosopher man alone still walks in dew,
> Still by the sea-side mutters milky lines
> Concerning an immaculate imagery.
> If you say on the hautboy man is not enough,
> Can never stand as god, is ever wrong
> In the end, however naked, tall, there is still
> The impossible philosophers' man,
> The man who has had the time to think enough,
> The central man, the human globe, responsive
> As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
> Who in a million diamonds sums us up.

The concept of the philosophers' man that Stevens gives here is precisely intellectual, but the intellectualism is surcharged with feeling which is appropriately supported by the images of mirror, diamonds, and globe. Stevens comes quite close to approaching a metaphysical concept here. One finds here a fine fusion of feeling, thought and imagination, something which characterizes Donne's poetry. This is also true of many other poems such as "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "The Latest Freed Man," and 'An Evening Without Angels'. Stevens' wit also shares much with the metaphysical wit as his verse forms and diction share with the metaphysical poets' ruggedness.

Stevens and the Romantic Tradition

If the intellectual quality of his property, his wit, his ruggedness in form established Stevens' relation with the metaphysical poets, his theory of imagination, his love for nature, and the emphasis on the interaction between man and his world brings him closer to the British romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge and the American Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Whitman. Like Coleridge, Stevens also emphasizes the supremacy of imagination over reason and thinks of the former as a means of achieving synthesis between the contraries, the particular and the universal. As O'Connor compares their concepts of imagination, "Both oppose as dichotomies the imagination and the rationalist mind; both view the imagination as a way of establishing communion with nature; and both employ light, particularly the moon and stars, as symbols for the imagination". But it needs to be added that unlike Coleridge, Stevens does not invest imagination with supernatural and transcendental qualities, nor does he think that it is the prerogative of only few people. Similarly, Stevens' delight in the physical world matches Wordsworth's. In 'The Idea of Order at Key West' and 'Sunday Morning' the descriptions of nature are very much like Wordsworth's in his

Immortality ode and 'Tintern Abbey'. But whereas Wordsworth's pagan love of nature is accompanied by ideas of transcendence, Stevens' delight is limited to this world almost in the manner of a hedonist. (For more details on this point see the chapter on Stevens Affinities with Romantics).

The French Tradition and Stevens' Poetry

The use of many French words, personal symbols, and a certain dandyism has led many critics to trace Stevens' affinities with the French Symboliste movement. Hi Simons, for example, traces the parallelisms in Stevens and Mallarme in respect of their use of colour symbolism, their concern with the poetic theory, and with the role of the poet in the society, and in their use of the expanded conceit. "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is often cited as an example of the French tradition in Stevens' poetry, and so is the "Worms at the Gates of Heaven". Other French poets with whom Stevens is often compared are Baudelaire and LaForgue. According to Hays, Stevens and LaForgue examine the same problems as well as use the same method to confront them. Again, in both poets the problem of decay in religion and the resulting disillusionment are juxtaposed with fading traditional idealism and a sharpened perception of reality.

Many other critics, however, have found Stevens' relationship with the French poets rather ambiguous. Stevens himself complicated the issue when he was asked to comment on his indebtedness to the French poets: "The lightness, the grace, the sound and the color of French have had an undeniable and precious influence on me." Benamou in his *Wallace Stevens and Symbolist Imagination* refers to Stevens' French heritage in equally equivocal terms: "Stevens and the Symbolist imagination are one, if by symbolist we mean central, and by imagination a horizon of basic images the centre of which has shifted since ancient times, from god to man." The relation, especially where it bears on the marked differences between Stevens and the French symbolists, has been succinctly described by Abbie Willard who says, "Unlike his French predecessors, Stevens refuses to establish a poetry based on mythical cosmology and turns instead to the world of experience. Poetry then for Stevens functions as 'not so much a transformation as an e quivalence.' And, unlike the French, Stevens found poetry to be functional in that it helps people to live their lives. In this, Stevens turns poetry away from the mythopoeic concerns of the nineteenth century and men such as Baudelaire or Rimbaud, and turns it toward a twentieth-century humanism."

Stevens and the Modern Tradition

Attempts have also been made to place Stevens firmly in one or the other modern tradition, that of T.S. Eliot or that of Imagism. Stevens' "La Monocle de Mon Oncle" has frequently been com-

pared with Eliot's Prufrock", while poems like "The Load of Sugar-Cane" with Pound's imagist poems. Other modern poets with whom Stevens' poetry has been compared include such different poets as John Crowe Ransom, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, E.E. Cummings, W.B. Yeats, the German Rilke and many others. All this shows the uncertainty in the minds of critics regarding Stevens' place in one or the other modernist tradition in contemporary poetry. Willard aptly remarks, "Unfortunately, perhaps some of the most fruitful ground for critics concerned with Stevens' modernity and contemporaniety is still relatively barren. Although Stevens' poetic career ended more than two decades ago and critics repeatedly emphasize his importance to twentieth-century verse, little attention has been devoted to his influence on those poets who lived during his time and even less attention devoted to his relationship with poets who have followed him".

Stevens' Modernity

The above analysis suggests that it is hard to place Stevens in any of the older or the modernist traditions of poetry. Nevertheless, Stevens' poetry does sound modern in several respects. Though Stevens' poetry has several things in common with different poetic traditions—metaphysical, romantic and French,—he is markedly modern in many ways.

Concern with Reality

Like most modern poets, Stevens is concerned with the reality underlying our religious beliefs, philosophical systems, and our relation with the world. This naturally compels him to adopt a posture of what can be called *denudation*. That is, reality can be reached only after the edifices of traditional beliefs, modes and attitudes have been stripped of the verbiage that surrounds them. As William Barret in his survey of existential philosophy says, "The labor of modern culture, wherever it has been authentic; has been a labor of denudation. A return to the sources . . . toward a new truthfulness, the casting away of ready-made presuppositions and empty forms". No other poet of our time its determined to bring us back to the irreducible facts of our existence as Wallace Stevens. In " The Snow Man", he exhorts the reader to discard all inherited thoughts about winter and to look at the landscape with the eyes of a snow man:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow . . .

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Not only in this poem but in many others, Stevens is concerned with this struggle to look at the reality, denuded of its pleasant coverings. His "A Clear Day and No Memories" powerfully brings out the awareness of nothingless that the modern man feels:

> Today the air is clear of everything.
> It has no knowledge except of nothingness
> And it flows over us without meanings,
> As if none of us had ever been here before
> And are not now; in this shallow spectacle,
> This invisible activity, this sense.

In "Lions in Sweden" Stevens' disparagement of moralism and his deflationary style are reminiscent of Sartre's :

> No more phrases, Swenson: I was once
> A hunter of those sovereigns of the soul
> And savings banks . . .

Stevens' Heterodoxy

Stevens quarrel with orthodoxy beliefs and traditional religious and moral attitudes is no less modernist. In "Sunday Morning" he finds fault with a religion which speaks of the blies in afterlife but refuses to acknowledge the existence of joy in this world.

> Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
> What is divinity if it can come
> Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
> Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
> In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
> In any balm or beauty of the earth,
> Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
> Divinity must live within herself . . .

Religious belief is the subject of Stevens' harsh, debunking satire in many poems. In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman", fcr example,. Stevens mockingly equates the Woman's traditional heaven with the peristyle of a mosque:

> Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
> Take the moral law and make a nave of it
> And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
> The conscience is converted into palms,
> Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
> We agree in principle. That's clear. But take
> The opposing law and make a peristyle,
> And from the peristyle project a masque
> Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
> Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last
> Is equally converted into palms,
> Squiggling like saxophones.

"The problem", as Stevens said in one of his essays "is with an over-human god", Stevens is no less harsh on the philosophical systems which emphasize transcendence. Unlike Eliot's *Wasteland*, Stevens' "The Comedian as the Letter C" ends with an acceptance of reality and with the rejection of all theories of transcendence.

Steven's Wit

Another modern feature of Stevens' poetry is his wit. He can easily give a twist to a traditional viewpoint and create a witty and radical effect. In "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" for example, he juxtaposes the dead body of an old poor woman with the rites of concupiscence going on in the kitchen. If religious thinkers and philosophers dismiss this world as a world of appearances and concentrate on a transcendental reality, for Stevens "be" is the "finale of seem" :

Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

A similar, though a bit more serious turn of wit is found in "The Death of a Soldier." Though the tone is sincere, the irreverent "three-day-personage" alludes to the myth of Christ:

Life contracts and death is expected,
As in a season of autumn.
The soldier falls.

He does not become a three-day personage,
Imposing his separation,
Calling for pomp.

But Stevens can be quite funny, and of course witty, in a poem like "Ploughing on Sunday", which is no less debunking:

Remus, blow your horn!
I'm ploughing on Sunday,
Ploughing North America.
Blow your horn!

Tum-ti-tum,
Ti-tum-tum-tum!
The turkey-cock's tail
Spreads to the sun.

Stevens' wit is equally manifest in a different context in "The Worms at Heavens' Gate" :

Out of the tomb, we bring Badroulbadour,
Within our bellies, we her chariot.
Here is an eye. And here are, one by one,
The lashes of that eye and its white lid . . . .

Concern with a Poetic Theory

Like most modern poets, Stevens is concerned with the relation of his poetry with the world. This is why he likes to theorize in many of his poems, most notably in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", which mentions three qualities of poetry as essential: It must be abstract: it must change, and it must give pleasure." In smaller poems also, Stevens is consciously concerned with what poetry should be at the present time. In "Of Modern Poetry" he writes:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script,

Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice.

Stevens' theory of imagination and reality, his ideas on a man-made order are all of a piece, and all of them recognize, realistically enough, the principle of change that underlies our mortal existence.

Style and Diction

Consistent with the concern with reality and poetic theory, Stevens goes in for new words and verse forms which help him to describe an experience afresh. Most of his poetry follows what he says in "Poems of Our Climate":

Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

Stevens' use of new coinages such as "floribund" (derived by combining flowery + moribund), neologisms, foreign and archaic words make him difficult to understand but, as R. P. Blackmur has pointed out, no word is replaceable in its context. The result may be a certain gaudiness and dandyism, but the ultimate effect on meaning is highly enriched. In this respect, Stevens differs with most modern poets who followed the trend of bare, unpolished language.

Interrelation of Tradition and Modernity

Though Stevens is quite modern in his attitude toward old beliefs, in his attitude toward poetic theory, and search for a new poetic order, his poetry presents a fine blending of the traditional and the modern. In this respect his poetry, as J. V. Cunningham describes it, is "parasitic of the tradition." Take the following example from Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West":

> It was her voice that made
> The sky acutest at its vanishing.
> She measured to the hour its solitude.
> She was the single artificer of the world
> In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
> Whatever self it had, became the self
> That was her song.

The description is Wordsworthian and reminds one of the "Solitary Reaper," but the concept of order is entirely Stevensian, for it has nothing of the transcendence that Wordsworth would find in a natural scene. Similarly, "Sunday Morning" is Wordsworthian in its description of the natural landscape, but it is iconoclastic in the sense that no transcendent, divine order is affirmed in the poem; instead, it is a secular myth of the sun, "not as god but as god might be," that Stevens creates:

> Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
> Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued.
> Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
> Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
> All pleasures and all pains. . . .

The same is the case with a short poem entitled "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm":

> The house was quiet and the world was calm,
> The reader became the book; and summer night
> Was like the conscious being of the book. . . .
>
> The truth in a calm world,
> In which there is no other meaning, itself
>
> Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
> Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

As Cunningham comments, this poem "has in fact the stability of a new material form attained out of the inveterate violation of the old. It is both modern and traditional. This is also true of some other poems of Stevens' which subvert the tradition they draw from. For example, "The Comedian as the Letter C" is Miltonic in its epic form and shares with the romantic poetry its quest motif, but the overall change that Stevens has brought about makes this poem quite modern.

To conclude, there is no denying the fact that Stevens is a predominantly modern poet who expresses contemporary issues and attitudes in verse and diction which explore new areas of poetic expression. Even when he resorts to the traditional, it is most often to subvert rather than imitate the tradition, whether it is metaphysical, romantic, or modern. This is what makes Stevens a poet who belongs to no definite school of poetry and who has left no imitators behind. □

7

Wallace Stevens' World View

Until not very long ago it was customary to dismiss Wallace Stevens as a dandy and a hedonist who delighted in verbal pyrotechnics but who had no serious view of life to present in his poetry. Yvor Winters, for example, thought of Stevens as a victim of hedonism, a poet of "emotion divorced from understanding" and a poet who found a subject for poetry "only in new degrees of intensity and strangeness." In Stevens' poetry, added Winters, "as each new degree achieved becomes familiar it is submerged in the monotone of that which is no longer new, so that the search is equally devoid of hope and significance." Not only this, comparing Stevens with Pope, Winters went to the extent of saying that Stevens was a victim of a philosophy "which offers the cultivation of the emotion as an end in itself, and relies on a novelty of a fairly crude kind as emotional stimulation in the arts." It is ironical that after passing such a comprehensive vote of no-confidence in the poet, Winters should think of writing about Stevens' poetry at all. The fact seems to be, though, that despite his dandyism, his iconoclasm, and hedonism, Stevens as a poet is seriously concerned with the metaphysical issue of man and the world, as well as with the examination of the religious and philosophical structures that the human mind has constructed. This is why he closely examines the relationship between subjective human imagination and the concrete external reality; the relationship between order and chaos; the relationship between man and his world; and, finally, the nature and theory of poetry. Since Stevens' views on the subject of the inter-relation of imagination and reality have been dealt with at some length in the preceding chapter, here the focus will be on other issues that Stevens subjects to close scrutiny.

Concept of Man

As a poet-thinker, Stevens is seriously concerned with humanity. According to James E. Mulqueen, the subject of all Stevens poetry is man, a figure symbolized as archetypal, Cosmic man. Morton Dauwen Zabel also emphasizes how, in the final phase of his poetry, Stevens "came to extend his search to humane and ethical values in his effort to rescue from 'this hoard of

destruction, a picture of ourselves, now, an image of our society,' the law of life and of the moral spirit which it is the duty of the artist (the man with the blue guitar) to rescue from the calamities and disorder of experience. Thus it was that Stevens came to condense into his poems the history of human privilege, luxury, aggression, and social wealth, and the struggle of man to find—in religion, in art, in moral and ethical disciplines, in philosophic order—the law of intelligence by which he may be rescued from his damnation." This is why adds Zabel, Stevens' poetry "rests on a conscious antithesis of forces of sentient man against unconscious nature, of animal existence against intelligence, of mind against passion and appetite, of order against chaos. . . ."

Rejection of Old Beliefs and Structures of the Mind

In order to understand this world and the reality underlying it, it is necessary to look at it without old prejudices deepseated in the human consciousness. Stevens does it by creating numerous characters in his poems who either represent these old intellectual structures and appreciation of this world. In "Sunday Morning," the Christian lady is living in the midst of her comfortable complacencies on a sunny terrace, but it is the old idea of a paradise, of the tomb and sacrifice, and of the "imperishable bliss" which makes her present comfort seem a guilt. Everything changes as she dreams of ancient sacrifice and thinks of the "old catastrophe":

> The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
> Seem things in some procession of the dead,
> Winding across wide water, without sound,
> Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
> Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
> Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

Stevens' narrator, therefore, assures the woman that the paradise she dreams of is only a boring duplicate of the earthly paradise.

This is also true of the philosophical structures which the human mind has created to understand the world but which have in the process clouded the understanding itself. The ascetic philosophers in "Homunculus et la Belle Etolile" are advised to see things as they are and not as their reflective, rational minds prompt them to; for reality, or truth for that reason,

> might, after all, be a wanton,
> Abundantly beautiful, eager,
>
> Fecund,
> From whose being by starlight on sea-coast,
> The innermost good of their seeking
> Might come in the simplest of speech.

The "floribund ascetic" in "Landscape with the Boat" on the other hand looks for a reality without the imaginings of its basic experiences. Being "an anti-master man," this "floribund ascetic."

. . . . brushed away the thunder, then the clouds,
Then the collosal illusion of heaven. Yet still
The sky was blue. He wanted imperceptible air.
He wanted to see. He wanted the eye to see
And not be touched by blue. He wanted to know,
A naked man who regarded himself in the glass
Of air, who looked for the world beneath the blue,
Without blue, without any turquoise tint or phase,
Any azure under-side or after-color.

But this ascetic did not know

That he might be truth, himself, or part of it,
That the things that he rejected might be part. . .
. . . . He never supposed divine
Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
And that if nothing was the truth, then all
Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth.

"The Bed of Old John Zeller," in contrast, shows how to be metaphysical by first being physical, and how to bother about the primacy of things while living in the physical world:

This structure of ideas, these ghostly sequences
Of the mind, result only in disaster. It follows,
Casual poet, that to add your own disorder to disaster
Makes more of it.

"The failure of the floribund ascetic," Fuchs succinctly remarks, "is a failure of imagination. He has failed to see the conceptual power of a landscape because he has failed to see the landscape itself. He has failed to perceive truth because he was not himself part of that perception." Stevens' own idea of a man bare of old ideas but gifted with the power of imagination figures in "The Latest Freed Man," for whom the sun is symbolic of the new dispensation. The vision of the latest freed man is an acceptance of this world and man's contact with it. Such a man is at the centre of reality.

Stevens is obviously a champion of the new and the present at the expense of the old and the past. His attitude towards those who prefer to live in the past is best represented in his "Oak Leaves Are Hands." Lady Lowzen belongs to the dead past and is therefore an object of derision:

Mac Mort she had been, ago,
Twelve-legged in her ancestral hells,
Weaving and weaving many arms.

Even now, the center of something else,
Merely by putting hand to brow,
Brooding on centuries like shells.

If the sentimental love for a past comes in for severe criticism, so does a faith in the future, especially the fantasy of a proletarian future. In Mr Burnshaw and the Statue section of "Owl's Clover," Stevens satirizes the Marxist politics thus:

> . . . Everything is dead
> Except the future. Always everything
> That is dead except what ought to be.
> All things destroy themselves or are destroyed.

In yet another poem, "Life on a Battleship," Stevens' political satire goes much farther:

> The captain said,
> "The War between classes is
>
> A preliminary, provincial phase,
> Of the war between individuals. In time,
> When earth has become a paradise, it will be
> A paradise full of assassins,"

Stevens' attack on traditionalism, religious beliefs, philosophical ideas, and political ideologies is all of a piece: it shows his concern for the perception of reality afresh, without any hindrance from accepted ideas. When man is rid of these religious, philosophical and political projections he can confront reality of the world and nature directly and understand and appreciate it.

Stevens' Hero

Stevens' view on man are often presented in his concept of man as hero. Because of Stevens' lack of faith in religion and mythologies, his hero is a human figure, often larger than life, but at times quite ordinary. In either case, however, he is capable of confronting the reality with the power of imagination. But Stevens' real hero is the poet, virile and imaginative, much in the same way that Plato's hero is the philosopher-king. The function of the poet as hero, as Steven describes it in *The Necessary Angel*, "is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. . . . I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives." In "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," Stevens asserted, "We have been referring constantly to the simple figure of the youth, in his character of poet, as virile poet. The reason for this is that if for the poet, the imagination is paramount, and if he dwells apart in his imagination, as the philosopher dwells in his reason, and as the priest dwells in his belief, the masculine nature that we propose for one that must be the master of our lives will be lost." Stevens lauds the role of the poet and projects him as the hero because in his opinion the poet "creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it."

The guitarist in Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is a wonderfully versatile tool for simultaneously talking about poetic imagination and the role of the poet:

> Tom-tom, c'est moi. The blue guitar
> And I are one. The orchestra
> Fills the high hall with shuffling men
> High as the hall. The whirling noise
> Of a multitude dwindles, all said,
> To his breath that lies awake at night.

The guitarist is the creator of other people's dreams.

It is, however, in "Asides on the Oboe" that Stevens expresses his views on the central man and the supreme fiction both of which are so dear to his belief:

> The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
> Of final belief. So, say that final belief
> Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

After rejecting the obsolete fictions given by religion and mythologies, Stevens offers a new one concerning the hero and defends his own belief thus:

> If you say on the hautboy man is not enough
> Can never stand as god, is ever wrong
> In the end, however naked, tall, there is still
> The impossible possible philosophers' man.

Such a hero will be

> The man who has had the time to think enough,
> The central man, the human globe, responsive
> As a mirror with a voice.

The major man in "It must be abstract" section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is the culmination of such a hero:

> It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
> The final elegance, not to console
> Nor sanctify but plainly to propound.

To accomplish this, the ephebe, the exponent, must be "able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination." The MacCullough who is projected as the major or the central man is an "expedient, Logos and logic, crystal hypothesis incipit and a form to speak the word." The birth of the major man occurs only in the conjunction of thought and emotion:

> Compact in invincible foils, from reason,
> Lighted at midnight by the studious eye,
> Swaddled in revery, the object of

The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind,
Hidden from other thoughts, he that reposes
On a breast forever precious for that touch.

To conclude, Stevens' concept of the major or central man as hero in the words of Susan Weston: "The Supreme fiction toward which Stevens is working at this time rests on the marriage of the hero (Logos) and the female imagination. And, of course, the mind's 'sexes' are projected on to the external world: the woman is the beloved reality and the giant is a man's idea of the physical world. . . . .This suggests that at the end of 'Notes' we ought to see a marriage of the two principles, male and female, Logos and reality, reason and imagination."

Stevens' Views on Evil and Death

Death is a frequent enough theme in Stevens' early as well as later poetry. "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "Sunday Morning," "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," "The Death of a Soldier," "Cortege for Rosenbloom" and many poems in *The Rock* examine this subject from different perspectives. For traditional thinkers death is a process in one's journey toward the eternal, but in Stevens' view, death is a part of life, and as such, it is the mother of beauty; for it adds meaning and beauty to the transience of life. The view is well expressed in "Sunday Morning":

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
Of sure obliteration on our paths,
The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
Whispered a little out of tenderness,
She makes the willow shiver in the sun
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

In "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" death is presented as an ordinary event which should not stand in the way of courtship and of whipping concupiscent curds in the kitchen. In the funny funeral poem, "Cortege for Rosenbloom," Stevens surcharges the whole atmosphere with a mysterious jumble and thrum. The whole procession is bug-like, the repeated rhyme a parody of that harmony which supposedly comes with the final rest that death provides:

Now, the wry Rosenbloom is dead
And his finical carriers tread,
On a hundred legs, the tread

Of the dead.
Rosenbloom is dead.

The tread of the carriers does not halt
On the hill, but turns
Up the sky.
They are bearing his body into the sky.

In the serious but witty "Death of a Soldier" death is presented as something that we know as part of the rhythm of life and nature. Despite death, human life goes on as usual, eternal and ephemeral as the clouds in the sky:

Death is absolute and without memorial,
As in a season of autumn,
When the wind stops,

When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
The clouds go nevertheless,
In their direction.

Evil and Poverty

For Stevens, as for Sartre, the human condition, the necessity to exist and act in the world is essence. Human existence is therefore the starting point of Stevens' aesthetic which includes suffering, pain and evil. When Stevens says in "Sunday Morning,"

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly,

he means that it is precisely because of our sense of the finite, of limitation, of transience that we feel the especially intense appeal of the mutable yet eternal objects of our natural lives. Life seeks some complication, some problem without which it seems to be incomplete. For the "evilly compounded I" of "The Poems of Our Climate," beauty in simplicity is not enongh:

There would still remain the never-resting mind,
So that one would want to escape, come back
To what had been so long composed.

One must face the difficulty of being:

The imperfect is our paradise.
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

In the whole of "Esthetique du Mal," Stevens' meditations are concerned with the general condition of humanity. For him tragedy is

universal rather than personal or individual. But Stevens is of the opinion that, as Daniel Fuchs puts it, "There is nothing to be envied like life or earth. Stevens is more convinced of the importance of the green corn gleaming than of the non-physical people in paradise. He knows the object of his desire. The implication is that if one's desire is for the non-physical paradise, it will necessarily be impossible to distinguish it from despair." This is all the more so since Stevens does not believe in any received theory about paradise and after life. Hence, the world as it is, with all its poverty, pain, suffering and death, must be accepted; what is more all these must be accepted not only as part of existence but even, as the means of aesthetic beauty. Most significant, man must insist on the fact that all his limitations are his own, not imposed on him by an over-human god with his abundant pity for mankind. As Fuchs observes, "If Stevens insists on poverty being the province of humanity, he does so for the greater glory of man. His blasphemy is beneficent, since it has as its source a version of the good life. Although the recognition of poverty is his theme it is precisely this recognition which is the key to the world's basic wealth." ☐

8

Poetic Technique and Style

The particular technique and style that a poet chooses to employ in his poetry depend on his worldview, life experiences and individual temperament besides his artistic equipment, and on his attitude towards the experiences he embodies in his different poems. In a poet like Stevens who wrote for nearly half a century, there cannot be just one style for the simple reason that his world-view may undergo a change and his linguistic preferences may also change. This is quite true of Stevens because when he began to write his style showed a certain gaudiness and his attitude towards received ideas a marked heterodoxy. Later, his style became more plain and abstract as he sought to grapple with not "the idea about a thing but the thing itself." No wonder, his style during the later period shows a meditative quality, and whatever ambiguity and obscurity it suffers from stem not from his archaic and gaudy diction but largely from the complexity of his thought. It is preferable, therefore, to talk of two different styles in Stevens: the ealier gaudy and excessively difficult style of the *Harmonium* period, and the later, more plain but meditative style of his mature poetry.

Early Style

As pointed out above, Stevens began as a dandy in art and impressed his readers not only with his original and heterodox ideas but with his difficult, somewhat archaic and gaudy diction. Take a much anthologized poem, "Bantams in Pine-Woods", for example:

> Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
> Of tan with henna hackles, halt!
>
> Damned universal cock, as if the sun
> Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.
>
> Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.
> Your world is you. I am my world.
>
> You ten-foot poet among inchlings. Fat!
> Begone! An inchling bristles in these pines,
>
> Bristles, and points their Appalachian tangs,
> And fears not portly Azcan nor his hoos.

One is immediately struck with both amazement and admiration for this sort of brilliant verbal pyrotechnics when one realizes that the poem on the surface describes the challenge posed by cocks to a bigger cock, Azcan, who is described as a ten-foot poet among inchlings. As R.P. Blackmur remarks, "The first and last distichs are gauds of rhetoric; neverthe less they give not only the tone but the substance to the poem.......The ability to handle rhetoric so as to reach the same sort of intense condensation that is secured in bare, non-rhetorical language is very rare, and since what rhetoric can condense is very valuable it ought to receive the same degree of attention as any other use of language."

Another notable quality in the style of this period is the skilful use of sound and sense. "Bantams in Pine-Wood" quoted above is just one example. Take "The Ordinary Women" to note the tone:

Then from their poverty they rose,
From dry catarrhs, and to guitars
They flitted
Through the palace...
The lacquered loges huddled there
Mumbled zay-zay and a-zay, a-zay.
The moonlight
Fubbed the girandoles.

According to Blackmur, "This is the mood of Euphues, and presents a poem with fine parts controlled internally by little surds of feeling that save both the poem and its parts from preciousness. The ambiguity of this sort of writing consists in the double importance of both sound and sense where neither has direct connect ion with the other but where neither can stand alone." More often Stevens relies on this gaudy language and on this rare combination of sense and sound to embody an experience which plain language cannot accomplish : The rhetoric of "Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds" creates an appropriate tone and atmosphere by a skilful combination of alliteration, rhythms, and sound :

Gloomy grammarians in golden gowns,
Meekly you keep the mortal rendezvous,
Eliciting the still sustaining pomps
Of speech which are like music so profound
They seem an exaltation without sound.
Funest philosophers and ponderers,
Their evocations are the speech of clouds.

Sometime Stevens' use of language during the early period verges on the creation of what may appear as nonsense verses. In "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," for example, the following stanza creates a little problem in understanding what the poet exactly means:

People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather.

The stanza is unintelligible unless one understands that Stevens' is here contrasting the quotidian routine and lack of imagination of the common people, the people in white gowns, with the imagination of a drunken sailor.

Varieties in the Early Style

Stevens' early style shows a lot of variety. When the theme so demands, Stevens can be light-hearted, ironical, plain, and gaudy. Several examples cited above show the gaudiness of early poetry. But Stevens, if he so chooses, can be awfully simple and non-figurative as in "The Snow Man".

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter.

In the whole of the poem the only figure of speech is the "mind of winter"; otherwise, the poem insists on seeing the reality without any figurative colouring of language or religious projections of the human mind.

Stevens' tone becomes blasphemous when he addresses the "High-Toned Old Christian Woman" :

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame,
Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave buil d haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms,
Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
We agree in principle. That's clear. But take
The opposing law and make a peristyle,
And from the peristyle project a masque
Beyond the planets.

Then, Stevens sometime chooses a style to subvert the subject matter for which that particular style has been used traditionally. In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" the speaker self-consciously mocks the heroic style which ill-suits middle-aged man :

"Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon,
There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,
Like the clashed edges of two words that kill".

And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.
Or was it that I mocked myself alone?

In "Sunday Morning", on the other hand, a Wordsworthian style is employed to subvert the transcendental immanence that Wordsworth found pervading Nature; simultaneously a ritualistic style is used to invert the original religious ritual and to substitute it with a ritual of the new may be "like a god" but is not :

Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights...

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god. but as god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.

Verbal Pyrotechnics

As noted above, Stevens' earlier poetry is rich in verbal pyrotechnics. One has often to turn to a dictionary for the meanings of the words used, and quite often in vain. As Gorham B. Munson remarks, Stevens "will say 'harmonium' instead of 'small organ,' 'lacustrine' instead of 'lakeside,' 'sequin' instead of 'spangle'; he will speak of 'hibiscus,' 'panache,' 'fabliau,' and 'poor buffo.' But as both Munson and Blackmur acknowledge, Stevens' choice of the words is determined by their exactness, neatness, precision and elegance. The use of "funset" in "Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds" is a case in point. As Blackmur notes, "funest is better than any of its synonyms. It is the essence of the funeral in sadness, not its sadness alone, that makes it the right word: the clouds go to their death, as not only philosophers but less indoctrinated ponderers know; so what they say, what they evoke, in pondering, has that much in common with the clouds."

More significantly still, Stevens' gaudiness in diction in the early poetry is a means to cover up or "embroider" blankness. As Susan Weston succinctly remarks, "It is less the picture of reality that gives pause to the reader of Stevens' *Harmonium* than the elaborate devices he uses to cover it up. Just as his favorite images are clothes—the wigs, gowns, hats and cloaks of the imagination draping naked reality—so too his favorite poetic device is some form of linguistic embroidery; nonsense syllables, radical diction, wide-ranging analogies, and equivocally adopted figures of speech. Stevens' verbal pyrotechnics are more often a stumbling block than his subject, for they either create an apparently impenetrable surface to the poem or modify the paraphrasable content with subtle ambiguities." But more often than not, though the verbal

decorations, like "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" are a means to cover the blankness of existence—

> Natives of poverty, children, of malheur,
> The gaiety of language is our seigneur—

They are also a means to embody the ambiguity at the heart of human expertence.

Later, Meditative and Plain Style

Though traces of Stevens' earlier gaudiness, his verbal play on language remain in the later poetry, Stevens' concern is more and more with the expression of reality in a plain language. As his last poem in *Collected Poems* fittingly supplies the conclusion, Stevens concern is "Not with Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself." In The *Rock* the style becomes meditative. Even in his views on modern poetry Stevens says that poetry

> . . . has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
> It has to face the men of the time and to meet
> The women of the time. It has to think about war
> And it has to find what will suffice.

Since Stevens' concern during this later phase is with the abstraction embedded in reality, the language assumes a simplicity which best expresses the nature of reality. Whatever complexity and ambiguity are found in this phase are due to the complexity of thought and the ambiguity inherent in human perception of reailty, not due to the style or diction. Take the following stanza from "Clear Day and No Memories," for example:

> Today the air is clear of everything.
> It has no knowledge except of nothingness
> And it flows over us without meanings,
> As if none of us had ever been here before
> And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,
> This invisible activity, this sense.

Not even a single word is difficult in this stanza. But as Steven Shaviro has noted, "This clarity is an immanence not susceptible to mediation but also not classifiable as simple immediacy. No objects are present, nor is there a subject of consciousness; yet there seems to be a materiality of thought, a flow, a spectacle, an activity, a sense. It is nothingness because nothing comes forth, because there is no appearance. But this nothingness is strangely active. A 'knowledge of nothingness' is not the same as a simple absence of knowledge." This kind of clarity of language embedding a complexity of thought is found in many later poems, notably "The Course of Particular."

Stevens 'Technique of Juxtaposition

Whether in early or in late poetry, one technique that Stevens frequently employs is that of juxtaposition of opposites and the resultant interaction between them. Imagination and reality, the perceiving subject and the perceived object, life and death, art and nature, idea and the thing, and many such opposites are presented together in different combinations in numerous poems. In a small poem like "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" many opposite images are used as the structuring principal. As Professor Narasimhaiah has noted, "The employment of pairs of opposite images in structuring the poem—of 'Emperor' and 'Ice-cream,' 'muscular one' and the 'horny feet,' 'wenches' and 'boys,' 'flowers' and 'last month's news-papers,' 'embroidered fantails' and 'horny feet protrude,' 'cold' and the 'lamp' with its beam, the dead woman in poverty as well as squalor and the living wenches dawdling in such dress as they are used to wear, appearance and reality, life-denial and life-assertion—is the poet's mode of indicating perpetuity of existence."

In another short poem "Anecdote of the Jar" the opposition is between the bare and barren jar and the "slovenly wilderness' of Tennessee. In "The Idea of Order at Key West" there is the interaction between the meaningless sound of the sea and the solitary singer's music; in "Sunday Morning," there is the rejection of the old religion and the enunciation of a new secular mythology of the sun; in "The Poems of Our Climate" there is the tension between the simplicity of the carnations and the complexity that the "evilly compounded" self of the persona seeks. The result of this technique is that the two things never remain the same when they are juxtaposed; they create, instead, a new thing, a new experience. The music of the solitary singer and the sound of the sea merge to create a new whole, no matter how temporary it is.

Sometime Stevens employs this technique to deflate the pompous claims made for the received philosophical and religious beliefs. The tension at the heart of a simple poem like "Ploughing on a Sunday" is between the hilarity of the speaker and the shock inherent in the fact that Sunday is meant for prayer, not for work. In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," the "haunted heaven" of religion is equated with the peristyle from which a masque is to be projected. In 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,' there is the tension, as in Prufrock, between the desire and the failure or incapacity to realize it. The heroic language which the uncle employs at the beginning to address his middle-aged wife recoils on himself and he is soon aware that he is not only mocking her but himself! Juxtaposed thus, the two things never remain the same but begin to comment on each other. The result is a complex vision of life.

Use of Images, Metaphors and Analogies

Another aspect of Stevens' poetic technique is an elaborate use of metaphors, images and analogies, all of which are a means

not only to reveal resemblance between two objects but also to reveal their interaction. More significantly still, resemblance is for Stevens a means of acquiring true knowledge of reality, in a state of flux. Stated simply, a metaphor, according to Suzanne, is a technique in which meaning is "created by and contained within the relation established between two terms." Developing on this definition in relation to Stevens' views on and use of metaphor, Donald Sheehan correctly isolates the two poles between which the techniques of metaphor must operate: unknowable, irreducible, external reality; and a coalescence of subject-perceiver and object-perceived that is metaphoric reality in which being and knowing are one. It is between these two poles that the poet searches for resemblance questioning metaphoric reality but at the same time refusing to accept unknowable reality. But according to Sheehan, Stevens also recognizes the limitations of metaphors. If metaphor is a prelude to knowledge of relationships, it may also become, and often becomes, an evasion of reality when it accepts the relationships thus established as actual and complete descriptions of reality. How problematic the relationship actually is, is best demonstrated by Stevens' several poems which consciously deal with the subject. On the comic level, there is the "Metaphors of a Magnifico":

> Twenty men crossing a bridge,
> Into a village,
> Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
> Into twenty villages,
> Or one man,
> Crossing a single bridge into a village.

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" does it much more seriously for, as Caldwell points out, "The poetic exercise of using metaphor in 'Thirteen Ways' operates as an interaction of external and internal world viewed here as thirteen structured portraits of a bird, but also thirteen vignettes of imagination and reality mingling metaphorically."

In *Harmonium*, particularly, Stevens relies very heavily on the use of analogies for bringing out the resemblance between two objects. Sometime Stevens uses analogies for the sheer delight of doing it, as in "The Curtain in the House of the Metaphysician":

> It comes about that the drifting of these curtains
> Is full of long motions as the ponderous
> Deflations of distance; or as clouds
> Inseparable from their afternoons;
> Or the changing of light, the dropping
> Of the silence.

A parallel use of multiple analogies is found in "The Load of Sugar-Cane," where, as Susan Weston has demonstrated, "the similes do not spiral outward toward the meaningful unseen, but

remain embedded in the actual. Each simile short-circuits itself by returning to the actual objects surrounding the 'going' of the boat":

> The going of the glade-boat
> Is like waterflowing;
> Like waterflowing
> Through the green saw-grass,
> Under the rainbows;
> Under the rainbows
> That are like birds,
> Turning, bedizened,
> While the wind still whistles
> As kildeer do.

Sometime, however, Stevens can work excellently with a single analogy, as in "The Death of a Soldier":

> Death is absolute and without memorial,
> As in a season of autumn.
> When the wind stops.
> When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
> The clouds go, nevertheless,
> In their direction.

Images

"A poet's imagery," says Morton Dauwen Zabel, "is the individuating medium of his sensibility. So, of course, are his rhythm, his tonal quality, his particular vision and the idea or intuition it embodies . . . We find the clues to Baudelaire's world in his imagery of cats, clocks, courtesans, sumptuous rooms, ships, seas, islands, and stark Parisian streets. We are inducted into Mallarme's researches by his symbolism of fans, fauns, stones, swans, bibelots, and hieratic artifacts and emblems. We enter the conscious as well as the secret parts of Hopkins' spirit through his metaphors of sensory miracle and shock . . . . Eliot depicted the history of the contemporary spirit in his *mise-en scene* of vacant lots, cheap hotels, ratinfested alleys, refuse-choked rivers, stale-aired houses, and purgatorial drawing-rooms." Wallace Stevens, according to Zabel, harmonized the methods of these poets : "His images succeeded in bringing into balance the intellectual and the realistic functions of metaphor and the limitation of his poetry, when compared with, say, that of Eliot, Hart Crane, and other men of larger historical or moral vision, is relieved by an exceptional felicity and charm of imagistic artistry which those poets . . . often left."

Stevens, it is to be noted, draws his images from many different arts and fields of life: painting, architecture, music, old mythologies (which he converts into secular myths, as in "Sunday Morning"). His imagery also shows the influence of abstract

painting on his work. Benamou, for example, has noted the "paraphernalia of Cubism, the guitars and mondolins, the still lifes arranged on tables, the plaster heads, the bits and odds that painters hoard for their collages." James Baird has similarly described Stevens' mode of observation as predominantly visual and emphasized the images of colour in Stevens' poetry. It needs to be emphasized, however, that though many of Stevens' poems are fine exercises in piling up images, the fact remains that his images often control the structure of the poem as well as its thought. As an example of this we quote the comments of Benamou on "The Idea of Order at Key West" where images and the central thought are inseparable: "In 'The Idea of Order at Key West,' we are offered both the theory and the practice of the 'maker's rage to order words of the sea.' This is a poem about poetic creation and, by way of illustration, the poet evokes an image of a port at nightfall. The order of the description suggests the brush of a painter organizing his pictorial space. The perspective he defines with sure repetitions becomes a symbol of the victory of art over chaos. The verbs carry the magic of his act: mastering, deepening, enchanting; the nouns and adjectives are fraught with pictorial vividness: fiery poles, glassy lights, emblazoned zones." In "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" Stevens' central image of ice-cream, titillating, transient and pleasant, emphasizes how the flux is more valuable than any abstract idea on mortality.

Another factor to be noted about Stevens' use of images is their private quality. Even in his colour symbolism, Stevens' use of "blue" signifies imagination while "red" shows the harsh light of reality. The "blue guitar" in the "Man with Blue Guitar" becomes a structural image of imagination trying to shape the chaotic reality. In short, though Stevens draws his images from various sources and though sometime he takes a sheer delight in creating a fabric of cluster of images, as in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and "The Load of Sugar-Cane," his visual imagery not only illustrates the central thought of his poems but also becomes an embodiment of it. □

[illegible] of the world. [illegible] the poet [illegible] Nature, the poet [illegible] [illegible] images of [illegible] in Stevens' poetry. It is [illegible], however, that [illegible] the [illegible] language [illegible] control the [illegible]. As an example of this we quote the [illegible] of "The Idea of Order at Key West" [illegible] and [illegible] thought are inseparably [illegible] we are offered [illegible] the [illegible] of the [illegible] for order [illegible] of the sea [illegible] and, by way of [illegible], the poet [illegible] of [illegible] ordering. The [illegible] organizing [illegible]. The verbs [illegible] fiery poles [illegible] "Ice Cream" [illegible] and [illegible] abstract idea of [illegible].

Another feature to be noted about Stevens' poetry is that [illegible] imagination [illegible] [illegible] embodiment of [illegible].

COMMENTARY OF SELECTED POEMS

Commentary of Selected Poems

1. THE SNOW MAN

Introduction

"The Snow Man" is an early poem of Wallace Stevens' in which he deals with the problem of perception of reality as it is, and not as it is thought to be. Although a strong advocate of imagination, Stevens was equally concerned with the purity and barness of perception, without any interference from pre-conceived notions about reality. "The Snow Man" shows just such an approach towards reality by describing a wintry landscape and refusing to colour the description with any thoughts of human misery.

SUMMARY

Stanza 1

The poem begins with the argument that in order to look at the reality of a winter landscape, the observer must possess a "mind of winter," a mind which is not only cold and clear but also a mind from which all illusions have been expelled. He should look at the bare, cold reality before his eyes without letting his thoughts and feelings interfere with the process of his perception. Only then can he see the frost and the snow-covered branches of pine-trees in their true reality.

Stanza 2

Such a perceiver must have had a cold mind for quite some time so that his thoughts and feelings do not interfere with his actual process of perception. As he beholds the junipers (kind of evergreen shrubs) crested with snow and rough spruces (kind of coniferous trees related to pines) in the distant glitter of the sunshine, there should be no thoughts about winter but only a direct confrontation with it.

Stanza 3

As the perceiver looks at the landscape in the distant glitter of the sun in the month of January (cold winter), he should not begin to think of any misery in the sound of the wind or in the sound of a few leaves as they flutter or fall. In other words, the perceiver should not at all identify his feelings with the bareness, coldness and nothingness of the wintry landscape.

Stanza 4

What he sees before him is nothing but the bare reality. The sound that he hears is clearly the sound on the land one can usually hear during a cold, snowy winter. This also holds good for the sound of the wind as it blows over all bare places.

Stanza 5

As the perceiver of the landscape and listener of the wintry sounds listens to the sound of the wind and the sound of trees on the land, he must listen to these as if he were himself unthinking snow. Then he will behold the vast nothingness before him and nothing that is not there (that is, he will not begin to colour his perception with a pathetic fallacy by associating human attributes to the landscape before his eyes).

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The Central Theme

The central theme of "The Snow Man" is of course the problem of perception of reality. In order to look at the bare reality as it is, and at nothing else, the observer must shed off all illusions and inherited attitudes and projections which tend to colour the vision and thereby provide a distorted picture of reality. In poetry, for example, the identification of the huamn world with the world of Nature is one of the many handicaps in the true perception of reality. Pathetic fallacy, that age-old poetic device to invest the lifeless objects of nature with human attributes, is another barrier. Religion and philosophy also provide their own barriers to a clear and cold perception of things. But in order to view reality as it is, to behold "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," one must have a mind of winter, cold, clear and without all illusions. The realist must focus on the central white or the "dominant blank" and throw all obsolescent flowers of human projections on the dump. He must confront the plain, unyielding nothingness, with all pre-conceived notions and formulations about it gone, and look at the bare, cold and empty place. According to George Lessing, "The Snow Man" is a starting point to examine Stevens' approach to human perception. But the problem involved in all perception is this: in any act of perception an imbalance in reality or in imagination is likely to occur because the process is after all human and therefore unreliable. But "The Snow Man," according to Lessing, has the right kind of "wintry, simplicity, a state in which the division between the perceiving self and the perceived reality is bridged and thereby reality is stripped of all subjective impositions."

In addition, the poem symbolizes the theme of man's alienation in this vast universe, this big "nothingness, and makes a strong plea for the recognition of this fact. As James Baird has pointed

out, Stevens' "reflection on the essential whiteness of the universe of being provides a strong American analogy for the familiar *l'etre et le neant* of the *existentialistes*. 'The Snow Man' stands in the early poetry as the prefiguration of the sharp white at the centre, or, as Stevens puts it in 'An Ordinary Evening in new Haven,' 'the dominant blank' at the end of existence." Commenting on this symbolic dimension of the poem, William York Tindall also observes, "The nothingness Stevens looks at in 'The Snow Man' is that of mathematical abstraction, the universe of twentieth-century science, emptier and even more discouraging than Hardy's nineteenth-century universe. The nothingness that Stevens looks at is emptier than the darkness and deprivation of sitting Eliot, at the end of whose negative way is a chorus of martyrs and virgins."

Susan Weston, however, notes a certain dualism in the presentation of the theme in "The Snow Man". According to her, "The very procedure that the poem recommends for seeing the world as it is also shows how difficult it is for the human perceiver to separate his perceptions from his thoughts. We would have to be snow men to remain indifferent to the force of the cold particulars: 'the junipers shagged with ice,' 'the distant glitter/of the January sun, and the insistent 'sound of the wind.' Although the poem affirms the blankness of the reality out there—the "nothing that is"—also affirms the inevitability of human projection: 'Nothing that is not there.' By suggesting that 'one' would have to be 'nothing' in order to 'behold' stark reality, the poem denies the possibility of knowing that reality bare of human projections."

Structure and Imagery

Though it is divided into five stanzas of three lines each, "The Snow Man" consists of just one long sentence. The flow of thought cuts across the barriers created by stanzas and thereby shows how difficult it is to give a form to a reality which one finds essentially shapeless. The poet carefully avoids loading the poem with any metaphor and other figures of speech because figurative language, as deconstructionists have recently emphasized, is one big obstacle to the perception of description of reality in language. There are no doubt two puns—*regard* (to consider, to respect) and *behold* (to *see* and to *embrace*)—but these are the means to show how difficult any description of reality is. The images of pine-trees, spruces "shagged with ice," are not only images: these are basically the facts the poem describes. The same is true of the sounds that the listener is advised to hear without any projections. In this respect the poem has, as Tindall remarked, "an elegance of austerity" rather than an "elegance of gaudiness."

Commenting on the style of the poem, Tindall remarks, "There are symphonic effects and description, but no metaphor intervenes until the end, where the snow man, there by aid of the title, embodies the 'mind of winter' and the reality on which this

mind casts a cold eye. Not only this snow man but the entire poem is an analogy for these. 'Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is' concentrates the austerities that have led to it. This concentration, at once felicitous and terrible, proves the capacity of naked discourse. Winter words for wintry matter, as elegant as any decoration, involve our feelings as directly as image can and, like epigram or wit itself, involve our minds. And, as Stevens says, naked discourse can imply the image it lacks." According to Blessing, the great success of the poetic technique in "The Snow Man" consists in the fact that the "reader is forced to think about and thereby participate in the reality of imagined winter." Thus Stevens' technique in "The Snow Man". fully supports and illustrates his basic idea that perception of reality should be bare of all projections.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. One must have a mind of winter
   To regard the frost and the boughs
   Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
   And have been a long time
   To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
   The spruces rough in the distant glitter
   Of the January sun.

Explanation—These opening lines of "The Snow Man" vividly present Stevens' argument about the perception of reality. In order to look at a winter landscape, the viewer must have a "mind of winter," a mind that is bare of all human projections and pre-conceived notions about the reality of a landscape in winter. He must look at things as they are, and not through what is in his conscious or sub-conscious mind. He must closely watch the frost and the branches of the pinetrees as they are covered with snow. He must develop this attitude to look at the junipers (kind of evergreen shrubs) as they are crusted with ice and must similarly look at spruces in the distant glitter of the sun in the month of January. The core of the argument is simply this: one must not bring one's ideas about a winter, cold, misery and barrenness to bear upon the perception of a landscape; instead, one must look at it as it is. In other words, reality, no matter how unpleasant, miserable or futile it seems, must be looked at without any pre-conceived notions about it.

These lines also demonstrate how necessary it is to look at reality without projections of the mind, and yet how difficult it is. There are hardly any figures of speech in these lines, because metaphors which are often employed to reveal reality often evade it. But in spite of this assertion, the lines do have a metaphor—"mind of winter"—which demonstrates that conception, perception and description go together, and it is quite difficult in practice to separate one from the other.

2. For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Explanation—These concluding lines of "The Snow Man" reaffirm Stevens' emphasis on the necessity of perception of reality without any pre-conceived notions about its nature. As an example, he has given the example of a winter landscape. But the beholder is asked not to hear anything which is not there, nor to look at anything which is not in the landscape. The difficulty is that the beholder must first make his mind a mind having nothing and being as blank as the wintry landscape. Only then he can look at the nothingness that pervades the whole scene; otherwise, he is likely to supply the details from his own mind and even associate many feelings with the description. The stanza is thus an important poetic statement about Stevens' theory of perception of reality. For different beholders may look at the same object or landscape but if they allow their mind a free play, each will behold the same thing differently. In other words, there is every need to avoid the interference of pre-conceived notions and to look at things as they are.

2. THE LOAD OF SUGAR-CANE

Introduction

"The Load of Sugar-Cane" is an example of imagism in its purest form. The poem is not weighted with any loftier or symbolic meaning; all that it does is to present a vivid image which leads to many others. The main delight that this poem offers is in its compositional quality, especially where it has to do with the use of multiple analogy.

Summary

The central image of the poem is a glade-boat rowed by a red-turbaned boatman. The series of images which are built on it are many; in fact, each image is associated with another. The sailing of the glade-boat is like the downward movement of water through green saw-grass when it is overshadowed by rainbows. The rainbows are like the gaudily-dressed, multi-coloured birds. The birds turn while the wind whistles, and the wind whistles as kildeers do when they rise at the red turban of the boatman.

Critical Commentary

The poem, as indicated earlier, is a fine example of imagism. Consisting of just one sentence spanned over thirteen lines of verse, this poem, as James Baird describes it, "is a small wonder of metaphoric water movement. Every object in the composition

is crafted to be like every other one." The first, central image of the glade-boat is modified by the flowing water. The rainbows are like birds. Birds turn while the wind whistles, and the wind whistles as kildeer do."—The kildeer's rising brings the image back to the boat by referring to the red-turban of the boatman. According to Susan Weston, the similes in this poem, unlike those in "The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician", do not "spiral outward toward the meaningful unseen, but remain embedded in the actual. Each simile short-circuits itself by returning to the actual objects surrounding the 'going' of the boat. The wind, for example, 'whistles/As kildeer do,' but the simile forces the poem back to the real rather than toward the ideal, for those kildeer whistle "when they rise/At the red turban/Of the boatman."

This poem, thus shows Stevens' experiment with imagistic poetry which Ezra Pound had popularized and which Stevens' contemporaries such as William Carlos William and Marianne Moore were practising. Compared with "The Snow Man" it shows the writer's ability to vividly capture an image in its actuality without colouring it with any of the human projections. But whereas "The Snow Man" is a terrible poem because of its emphasis on human nothingness combined with the nothingness in the universe, "The Load of Sugar-Cane" has no such deep meaning. Its purpose is to convert a reality into a series of pictorial similes and then show that the similes are nothing but simultaneous, embedded images of the reality being described. If "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" is developed through a denial of positive terms, nothing is affirmed in "The Land of Sugar-Cane" in spite of the positive terms that are used in this poem. Commenting on the imagistic elements in Stevens' first volume of poem, *Harmonium* (in which "The Load of Sugar-Cane" is one poem), Frank Kermode says that these poems are imagistic because they exemplify the poet's interest in the fresh and concrete, while they are unlike imagistic poems because most of these poems involve abstract process.' But "The Load of Sugar-Cane" is an example of pure imagism because it does not involve any abstract process; for it begins with actuality and bring after a series of analogies, brings the reader back to the same actuality.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. The going of the glade-boat . . . turban of the boatman (II.1-13)

Explanation : The poem "The Load of Sugar-Cane" is a fine specimen of Stevens' use of imagism in its purest form. Thoroughly a descriptive piece, it demonstrates the piling up of one image on another. The movement of the glade-boat is compared with the movement of the water flowing through the green-grass under the rainbows. The rainbows are then compared to birds. As the birds turn, their movement is like the whistling of the wind which, in turn, is compared with the rising of the kildeer. The kildeer's

rising completes the cycle by bringing the reader back to the central image of the glade-boat, because the kildeer rise at the red turban of the boatman who is rowing this glade-boat.

The whole poem is a fine example of multiple analogies which are, interestingly enough, not simply comparisons but actual facts! There is hardly any metaphorical or symbolic meaning, but the poem is delightful as a fine artifact in which one image is carefully crafted on the other, without creating any ambiguity or giving metaphorical dimension to the description of the single, central image of the glade-boat.

3. LE MONOCLE DE MON ONCLE

Introduction

Though originally written three years after the more famous "Sunday Morning," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (The monocle of my uncle) was published at the beginning of *Harmonium*. One of the most precious poems of *Harmonium*, "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is a traditional dramatic monologue which, untraditionally enough, falls into twelve stanzas of eleven lines each. The central issue in this poem is the meditation of a man past forty on the course of love, which also becomes a meditation on what will ultimately prevail in this world of change and mortality. But the meditation is comic, just as the uncle himself is a comic figure examining life with a single lens (the monocle) and thereby providing a partial vision. Consistent with the nature and temperament of the speaker, the whole poem is written in a mock-heroic style in which lordly blank verse is accompanied by a mixture of irregular rhymes and half-rhymes. The organizing principle of the poem depends on the tone and the manner of a single speaker, the aging uncle with his monocle.

As a dramatic monologue is addressed to a person who does not speak but whose presence, hint or suggestion, causes the speaker of the monologue to express his thoughts and feeling (think of Browning' dramatic monologues, Tennyson's "Ulysses", or T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock"), the initial stiuation in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is only to be imagined. Since the opening section begins with an inflated address to a woman, it is perhaps preferable to imagine the situation asfollows: It is the time of morning and the French uncle is with his aging wife. She has made some remark to his query. The remark (or response) could be "No, nothing or "Never". Nothing)". And it is her remark that prompts the uncle to go on with his mock-meditation on the course of love and life.

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

Stanza 1

The aging uncle addresses the lady (perhaps his aging wife) in a mock- heroic tone: "Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds . . . etc)" and says that there is never "No", never a "nothing," for these two words, like the clashed edges of two words kill. The mocking tone of the address makes the uncle conscious of the object of his mocking, and this reminds him that what is applicable to the lady is no less applicable to himself. He is reminded how this very lady was once a "radiant bubble" of beauty which has nearly passed away. And what about himself? The thought is shocking. and so he would like to be a thinking stone, rather than a man of feeling.

Stanza 2

The red bird (a symbol of youthful imagination) flies across the floor and he will find out the company of his fellow singing birds. When he has done that, a torrent of music will flow from him. But no such creative act can come from him, thinks the uncle, who is already past forty. It is time that he starts greeting his successors, for the choirs of welcome the red bird mean a choir of farewell for him. No spring can follow when one has already crossed the youth and yet the lady, says the uncle, persists in her imagination on the youthful bliss which is now no more than an anecdote.

Stanza 3

The appearance of the lady in her middle-aged disarray prompts the uncle to wonder what will ultimately prevail. If ege has come, and from it begins the journey to nothingness, isn't there some substance that a man may leave behind? Is it really for nothing that the old Chinese sages sat by the pools and adorned their beards? The uncle will not, however, play the flat historical scale of aging. He would like to leave some creative act behind him, the way Utamaro left behind the beauty of the braids. If beauties could survive in art, have all the shapers, the barbers lived in vain so that they could not make even a single curl in nature live? The thought of the uncle in this stanza is thus clearly in favour of doing some creative act and achieving something in art which may provide an escape from mortality.

Stanza 4

The need to create an artifice of eternity, something which will not age, felt again in stanza 4. For the earthly beauty, as well as love, this "luscious and impeccable fruit of life" falls of its own weight in this world of process. This is evident from the loss of youthfulness and beauty of the lady. When she was young, the acrid juice of her beauty was sweet. But consummated

love becomes acrid; the pleasures of sexuality are great when anticipated, not when consummated. When the flower has become the fruit of love it is a book too mad to read.

Stanza 5

The next stanza, stanza 5, brings out the contrast between youthful love and middle-aged love. The furious star in the west inspires the fiery boys and sweet-smelling virgins with intense feelings of love. But so far as the middle-aged uncle is concerned this furious star is no better than the fire-fly's quick, electric stroke because it simply means for him the passage of time; the arrival of spring means not the joy and intensity of love it brings, but the simple passing away of another year. And what applies to the uncle also applies to the lady. The nights turned pale for her when she first found inklings of her aging and progress to old age.

Stanza 6

Aware of his age, the uncle now wonders how human beings romanticize, even sentimentalize, their sexuality by giving it strange quirks. But these quirks change with the coming of age. Love becomes a matter of gestures and words rather than the matter of action:

> When amorists grow bald, then amours shrink
> Into the compass and curriculum
> Of introspective exiles, lecturing.

But love is basically a matter of youthful action, a theme for "Hyacinth alone," not for bald amorists. So the search must begin for the "substance in us that prevails."

Stanza 7

The uncle now reminds the middle-aged lady to accept the reality of her aging and not think of her "anecdotal bliss" or stories and myths of romance. The past is gone and heaven may not after all exist. But the honey of the earth both comes and goes. It would be impossible to think of a damsel "heightened by eternal bloom." But if one supposed there were in fact an eternal Eve !

Stanza 8

Love is subject to change and process: it comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies. This acknowledgement makes the uncle say, "Our bloom is gone." Both he and the middle-aged lady are no longer flowers of youth, but they are rather its fruit ; "two golden gourds distended on our vines." They are like watery squashes, streaked and rayed, and when the rotting winter rains come the two of them will be washed into rinds.

Stanza 9

The uncle now thinks of writing a hymn of love which will be appropriate at his age so that he and the lady together celebrate the "faith of forty" and act as ward of Cupid, the god of love. But when he looks for the sounds, the thoughts and everything else for the music and manner to make the hymn a fitting one, he fails to find the necessary bravado with which he can compose such a hymn of love at this age ? The reality of his age once again mocks the uncle, and this does not seem to be a way to find the substance that prevails.

Stanza 10

The poets may create poems of great imagination rather spontaneously. But the uncle is a yeoman so far as writing poetry is concerned. He knows no magic trees, no balmy boughs. He is past his romantic imagination. All that he knows now is a tree that only approximates that romanticism of old. His is an imagination of ripe fruit rather than romantic flowers. But he will endure as himself. The prospect to note is the flight of birds associated with age.

Stanza 11

This stanza explores the uncle's idea if there can be any life or significance, once the bloom of youth is gone. For the loss of sensuality is the loss of the sensual comforts of the sun, and the uncle finds himself exiled from all such sensual enjoyments. He would like to write a youthful poem, acting as the ward of Cupid, but the age mocks his efforts. He tells the lady how their sitting together by the pool of pink, "klippered with lilies scudding the bright chromes," last evening brought only the raucous cry of the frogs and nothing romantic.

Stanza 12

This stanza concludes the long meditation. Whatever prevails, the individual does not. The poem therefore closes with bird imagery. The red bird seeks out its choir in spring time; a blue bird that circles in the blue sky of imagination, and white pigeon that flutters to tne ground. As William York Tindall says, "Whether soaring aloft or fluttering down, pigeons are appropriate to sentiment, be they blue or white, but putting rabbis next to them is the unlikeliest thing in the world, particularly when the old rabbi is 'rose.' Uncle is both rabbis; but when young, he should have been rose, not dark. When young, instead of observing, he should have pursued. Here, blue and white, dark and rose, passive and active are curiously mixed. Things missed and mixed and white fluttering things bring age and death to mind." So, discovering the insufficiency of sex, the uncle must look to himself, a "fluttering thing," for a new theme.

CRITICAL COMMENTS

"Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" occupies a prominent place in Stevens' poetry because Stevens never returned the form of the dramatic monologue for meditative poetry. As Daniel Fuchs observes, "There are times when the sartorial elegance of his [Stevens'] verse makes emimently presentable the disarray of his feelings, as in 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle.' If the poem is an inversion of elevated passion, it is also a tumultuously weary comment about the loss of passion."

The Central Theme

The central theme of this poem is undoubtedly the lamentation on the loss of youth and youthful passion. Having crossed forty, and finding for himself the inadequacies of sexuality, the uncle tries to look for a substance that prevails after youthful passion is gone. In this respect, the substance of the uncle's meditation is close to the theme of "Sunday Morning." But the old assurance is gone. The world of the sun as a secular god is there for the young and the beautiful, but when "amorists grow bald, then amours shrink", what is left for these bald amorists, the wards of Cupido to do now is only to lecture on the loss of sensuality rather than indulge in it. The poem is thus not only on the subject of the passing away of love and youth, but also on the subject of process, "course," as he calls it. When youthful passion is consumed, the search for the "substance that prevails" must begin. The meditation on consumed passion concludes uncertainly :

> . . . later I pursued,
> And still pursue, the origin and course
> Of love, but until now I never knew
> That fluttering things have so distinct a shade.

He must therefore search for a new theme. But what that "new theme" exactly is, he has yet to find out. So the poem ends virtually where it began. But in between it does reveal what it feels to be forty, or how a dandy of forty feels.

Comparison with Prufrock

Though in feeling and mood "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" sounds closer to Eliot's "Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock," the two poems are essentially different. Prufrock never withers because he never blossomed; the uncle on the other hand, bemoans the loss of something which he actually possessed once. As Daniel Fuchs remarks, "Despite his initial self-castigation Stevens' persona is no Prufrock. The tone of Stevens' poem—with its subtle modulations of feeling and ridicule, wistfulness and composure, pain and confidence—and of the other Stevens' poems . . . . shows that he is essentially high-spirited and is engaged in a

free laughter of the mind, though it is at times a defensive laughter. The difference between Prufrock and the middle-aged *oncle* is that the former feels old before his time. Stevens' protagonist has heard the voice of the sirens, and they still sing to him, despite his own sophisticated protestations and the reality of oncoming age."

Style

The mock-heroic style of the poem and its form of a dramatic monologue saves "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" from being a sentimental poem about the passing away of youth and beauty. It is Stevens' joyousness in life and fastidious energy which makes the monocled uncle laugh at himself with a clarity and spirit of comedy which Eliot's Prufrock lacks. Commenting on this aspect of the two poems, Wylie Sypleer writes, "Stevens is endowed, as Eliot with his chill humor is not, with the Meredithian comic spirit, a mocking awareness of our absurdities and our pretense . . . The comedy . . . is ringing with the silver laughter of the Meredithian faun; eruptive images, riotous language, springing delight over the victim, the intellectual tensions of *The Egoist*. The moments of high comedy in 'Le Monocle'. Indicate how defensive are the ironies of *Prufrock*."

The monocle of the uncle also adds to a comic effect and of course a certain distancing from the author; for the monocle suggests a partial, one-lensed vision. Though the vision is more sharp, insofar as self-awareness is concerned, yet it cannot be said to be a balanced or comprehensive vision. This is why it allows Stevens to laugh with as well as at his persona simultaneously. Needless to say; the laughter that this poem produces, through its mock-heroic situation and characters, is essentially a laughter of the mind, a civilizing, if controversial, laughter.

Also remarkable, stylistically as well as structurally, is Stevens' symbolism of colours—note the red, blue, and white colour of the birds in the poem, symbolizing respectively, youthful vitality, imagination, and harsh reality—and his method of juxtaposing images. The remarks of Tindall on this aspect of the poem are worth quoting: "He [Stevens] displays his complexity by odd juxtapositions: of feeling and tone, of manner and matter; of the extravagantly poetic with the blandly ironic. 'Saltier well' and 'basic slate' are on one verbal kind; 'bravura,' clippered,' and 'Cupido' of another; and 'damsel' of a third. As for matter: the hair of Part III is of two kinds: elaborately arranged or naturally, disordered. As classical Chinese and Japanese er the ladies of eighteenth-century Bath once studied hairy artifice, so from sleep a present or remembered girl comes disheveled. From a 'romantic pool of pink' in Part XI a frog booms 'from his very belly odious chords."

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.
Or was it that I mocked myself alone?
I wish that I might be a thinking stone.
The sea of spuming thought foists up again
The radiant bubble that she was. And then
A deep up-pouring from some saltier well
Within me, bursts its watery syllable.

Explanation—These lines are a part of the opening section of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." The uncle first addresses a middle-aged lady in a mock-heroic tone and language as "Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds" and then realizes that the mockery is not entirely at her expense. For what he has said about the middle-aged lady is equally applicable to himself since he too is past forty. The thought of aging fills him with an agonizing feeling and so he would like to be a thinking stone, since stones do not age and grow bald as men and women do. But, as James Baird comments, "To be human is to know the flowing mind. Out of the sea of spuming thought" beauty was borne in a radiant bubble, 'its watery syllable.' In this eloquent metaphor the struggle is described. The watery syllable in the mind will burst. Its momentary radiance will disappear. The prosaic sense of the passage is that the bubble from the spume must be articulated and brought to form in language that will preserve that effect of momentairness. This is a confrontation of the problem of the hand. . ."

The mock-heroic style of the passage makes this speech quite consistent with the self-mocking attitude of the speaker, the uncle with the monocle. Commenting on this aspect of the given lines, Daniel Fuchs observes, "These lines, in their progression from highest ethereal being to lowest corporeal being, are the self-conscious expression of a dandy who knows that effusions of passion are embarrassing and ludicrous, and that the lack of them threatens dehumanization." These lines thus aptly capture the mood and the bitter self-mockery of the speaker.

2. Shall I uncrumple this much-crumpled thing?
I am a man of fortune greeting heirs;
For it has come that thus I greet the spring.
These choirs of welcome choir for me farewell.
No spring can follow past meridian.
Yet you persist with anecdotal bliss
To make believe a starry *connaissance*.

Explanation—In these lines from "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," the middle-aged speaker, the uncle with the monocle, continues to bemoan the passing away of youth, and the loss in sexual vitality. A red bird, symbolizing youth, flies across the golden floor to seek out his companion. What is left for the aging uncle to do? Shall he uncrumple the feelings of his mind when the

mind is itself much crumpled because of age? At the age of forty, he must be ready to greet his heirs rather than look for the choir that the bird looks. This is the only way, he thinks, he can greet spring, for the spring which indicates a vibrant joy for the youthful people means only the passing away of another year for him. So the choirs of welcome that the young people sing simply mean songs of farewell for the uncle; for no spring can come and have any significance for a man who is already middle-aged. So, he rebukes the aging lady that it is no time to think of the good old romantic days of youth or to fill the mind with the thoughts of a starry connaissance (No ideas of heaven, or any memories of the youthful past) can take away the simple and poignant fact of aging.

3. You know how Utamaro's beauties sought
The end of love in their all-speaking braids.
You know the mountainous coiffures of Bath.
Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain
That not one curl in nature has survived?
Why, without pity on these studious ghosts,
Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep?

Explanation—These lines reveal the aged uncle's meditations on the passing away of youth, beauty and love in Stevens' "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." The passing away of youth reminds the speaker of the monologue, the uncle with the monocle, how art has tried in the past to defeat the passage of time. Addressing the middle-aged lady, probably his wife, the uncle says that she knows how the braids of the beautiful women in Utamaro's paintings have given an imaginative rendering to the process of time and its impact on the mortal men and women. The art survives the models. This is how imagination triumphed in a distant past. The ladies of the eighteenth-century Bath (in England) were similar imaginative artists who painted their faces and grew their hair into braids. The uncle, who chides the lady for her disheveled hair, then poses the question; "Have all the barbers lived in vain. That not one curl in nature has survived?" The barber, as James Baird remarks, is the artist: the curl, like the braid, is the sign of his work of the imagination. "Nature here is the continuum of man. . . .The sum of the questions is that no art of the past is to be answered to or emulated in any present." The uncle would then like to find a fulfilment in art, a fulfilment that sensuality can no longer provide. This is the subject of his next sections.

4. This luscious and impeccable fruit of life
Falls, it appears, of its own weight to earth.
When you were Eve, its acrid juice was sweet,
Untasted, in its heavenly, orchard air.

Explanation—These lines from the 4th section of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" emphasize the speaker's views on the process of aging. When the lady he is addressing was young and beautiful,

the joys of sensuality were really sweet, especially before the consummation of passion. Sexuality anticipated is sweeter than sexuality fulfilled. But that was a long time ago. Now the sweet blossoms have ripened into fruits which in turn must fall because of their own weight one day.

5. In the high west there burns a furious star,
It is for fiery boys that star was set
And for sweet-smelling virgins close to them.
The measure of the intensity of love
Is measure, also, of the verve of earth.
For me, the firefly's quick, electric stroke
Ticks tediously the time of one more year.

Explanation—These lines from "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" contrast the experience of youthful lovers with the experience of middle-aged people. The coming of the spring night indicates for the passionate youthful lovers a period of joy, as it does for the sweet-smelling virgins. For them, love is the very verve of the earth, and the intensity of their love increases with the coming of spring (which symbolizes youth as well). But for a middle-aged amorist such as the monocled uncle, the "furious star" of love has been metamorphosed into the "firefly's quick, electric stroke." The youthful passion has become regulated sensuality, and as such, the coming of the spring no longer makes him, or for that matter his aging wife, burn with the intensity of love; instead, it seems to signal the end of another tedious year.

6. When amorists grow bald, then amours shrink
Into the compass and curriculum
Of introspective exiles, lecturing.
It is a theme for Hyacinth alone.

Explanation—These lines from Stevens' "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" express the monocled uncle's thoughts on the passing away of youthful passion and love. Love really is the subject-matter of the young people, not of elderly, middle-aged people. For them it is only a matter of intellectual discussion, a matter of curriculum, since they have become bald amorists and therefore introspective exiles from all intimate experiences of intense, youthful sensuality. As Susan Weston comments, "Speaking politely of love, the uncle is actually considering the nature of sexuality—the ruses and romanticisms we give to our sexual natures, the 'quirks' that come with age. Feeling isolated from his aging wife, to whom he continually turns with unarticulated suggestions, the uncle finds himself increasingly introspective, his 'amours' shrunk from deed to word, from action to lecture."

7. Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.
Two golden gourds distended on our vines,
Into the autumn weather, splashed with frost,
Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque.

Explanation—These lines from Stevens' "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" aptly and vividly describe the experience of aging which confronts the speaker of this dramatic monologue: the monocled uncle in the meridian of his life. Addressing his aging wife, he tells her that their youthful blossoms have disappeared. Now they are ripe fruits of what were once beautiful flowers. They are like two unshapely and ripe gourds hanging on their vines. They are in the middle of autumn, splashed with frost and distorted by their unseemly, aging appearance. The speaker thus vividly presents the picture of two aging persons through the metaphors of changing seasons and the process of change which affects the vegetable as well as the human world. These lines thus express the utter humiliation of the aging body and the mind's attendant foreboding of death and decay.

8. Most venerable heart, the lustiest conceit
Is not too lusty for your broadening.
I quiz all sounds, all thoughts, all everything
For the music and manner of the paladins
To make oblation fit. Where shall I find
Bravura adequate to this great hymn?

Explanation—The middle-aged, monocled uncle in Stevens' "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" would like to find a substitute for sexuality in some great hymn yet to be written, since amorists grown bald can only intellectualiz: and lecture on love. Naturally, he looks for language and tropes adequate enough to describe the lustiest feelings of the heart through some lustiest conceit. But thoughts and sounds, rhythms and rhymes of the verse are not at his command. Nor can he muster music to make the hymn lyrical. But what is lacking most is the bravado which only youthful people have to express love whether in action or in language. These lines thus remind the reader of Eliot's Profrock, with the difference that whereas Prufrock's expression of his failure is largely unconscious, Stevens persona is aware of his failure and frustration.

9. Anguishing hour!
Last night, we sat beside a pool of pink,
Clippered with lilies scudding the bright chromes,
Keen to the point of starlight, while a frog
Boomed from his very belly odious chords.

Explanation—These comico-pathetic lines from Stevens' "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" reveal in vivid langugge and imagery the plight of the middle-aged, monocled uncle who, after the passing away of his youth, is searching for the substance that prevails. The uncle describes the experience with his middle-aged wife near a pool of pink the previous evening. The pool of pink was shaped beautifully with lilies which had a scudeering bright chromatic colour. But before this scene could inspire the uncle, he heard the sound of a frog. The juxtaposition shows how even a romantic scene has lost its appeal for the midle-aged uncle because some discordant

element destroys it for him. The lines are an imagist *tour de force*. As Michel Benamou comments, "The colour contrast is heightened by a clash between the subdued alliteration of plosives in the first line and the consonance of harsh 'k' sounds in the second line. But the pleasure derived from this feat of virtuosity would seem a little cheap were it not for the startling nautical metaphor with its ironical overtones attuned to the context."

10. A blue pigeon it is, that circles the blue sky,
On sidelong wing, around and round and round.
A white pigeon it is, that flutters to the ground,
Grown tired of flight. Like a dark rabbi, I
Observed, when young, the nature of mankind,
In lordly study.

Explanation—These opening lines from the concluding section of Wallace Stevens' "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" employ bird imagery to express the poignancy of transience. The blue bird that circles in the blue sky is the symbol of imagination, but the white bird, the white pigeon in the third line is indicative of old age and death. Thus the red-bird of the beginning of the poem has by now become a white bird, emphasizing transience and process of change, which for human beings, means a process of aging. As Tindall comments on this stanza, "Whether soaring aloft or fluttering down, pigeons are appropriate to sentiment, be they blue or white, but putting rabbis next to them is the unlikeliest thing in the world, particularly when the old rabbi is 'rose'. Uncle is both rabbis; but when young, he should have been rose, not dark. When young, instead of observing, he should have pursued. Here, blue and white, dark and rose, passive and active are curiously mixed. Things mixed and missed and white fluttering things bring age and death to mind." To this one may add James Baird's remark about the whole poem: "The prospect to note in this early poem is that of growth associated with the flights of birds, season to season, as age progresses."

4. THE WORMS AT HEAVEN'S GATE

Introduction

"The Worms at Heaven's Gate" is an early example of Stevens' denial of any mythology beyond the graveyard. Like "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" another poem in *Harmonium* dealing realistically with the issue of death, the Worms at Heaven's Gate describe the dead body but without any aura of sentimentality and with an equally clear denial of any religious superstructure.

SUMMARY

The speakers in the poem are the grave-worms (maggots) who speak of the plight of a dead body in the grave with an exceptional gusto.

The worms say that they bring Badroulbadour (a symbol for the "gaudy tulip") out of the tomb to the gates of heaven. What they bring are the eaten-out parts of the human body: an eye, the lashes of that eye and its white lid; the cheek on which that lid declined, and finger after finger; the hand; the genius (artist) of that cheek. Here are, say the worms, the lips, the bundle of the body and the feet. This is the only reality that they have to carry to the gates of heaven.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Remarkably enough, the poem is terrible, as terrible perhaps as Robert Frost's "Design," and equally without any trace of sentimentality. The reader is made to feel the ultimate fate of that company who, "gaudy as tulips," mount the stairways of those "wickless halls". This is quite true of much of Stevens' early poetry in which he tries to express the thing as it is, bare of all human projections, religious or mythological. In "The Snow Man" he insists that the perceiver of the wintry landscape must have a "mind of winter"; in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," he treats death as an ordinary matter, emphasizing the reality of the senses. As Llewelyn Powys remarks, "There is something terrible about these suspended edifices. They are made of the same stuff, of the same unreal reality, obscure and yet objective, that might disturb the painted dreams of a praying mantis."

If anything, "The Worms at Heaven's Gate" does certainly disturb the dreams that people cherish of heaven and after life because of the golden mythologies they have created about them. But Wallace Stevens insists on seeing reality as it is. He makes us aware of our ghastly lot with an exquisite and convincing dexterity:

> Out of the tomb, we bring Bradroulbadour,
> Within our bellies, we her chariot.
> Here is an eye. And here are, one by one,
> The lashes of that eye and its white lid.

In their power, these lines are as terrible as the lines from "The Emperor of Ice-Cream".

> If her horny feet protrude, they come
> To show how cold she is and dumb.

People try to explain these realities away by weaving fictions of the mind; Stevens insists that they should be seen for what they are and accepted with a certain gusto, and without any sentimentality.

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

1. Out of the tomb......we bring Badroulbadour

Explanation—This is one of Wallace Stevens' deflationary poems the main object of which is to question after-life and all human projections about a haunted heaven which the human mind has created. The speakers of the poem are maggots, worms that eat the dead body in a grave. Appropriately enough, it is they who are made to question all myths about heaven and after-life. The worms say that what they bring with them to the gate of heaven (if any) is not the human soul (which in fact is denied); it is rather the different decomposing limbs of the prompous being buried in the grave (the sex of the person is feminine but the name suggests pride and pomposity). Acting as a chariot of the dead body (not the soul!) the worms refer to the eyes; the eye-lashes, the white lids, the cheeks (on which the eye-lids declined when the person was alive), finger after finger, and the hands which decorated the face and thereby acted as a genius of the cheeks when the lady was alive. The whole body is crumped and looks like a bundle, and a feast for the worms, a fact of which the worms proudly boast! The poem is thus an important specimen of Stevens' debunking of the theories of heaven and after-life. For him the earthly existence is the only one that human beings enjoy; all thoughts about heaven are false.

5. A HIGH-TONED OLD CHRISTIAN WOMAN

Introduction

"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman", first published in *Harmonium*, has been rightly described as one of Wallace Stevens' most outrageous poems. Agnostic as he was, Stevens had no respect for traditional orthodox religion, least of all for its Brahamanical variety which is known as puritanism. The adjective "High-Toned" in the title finds fault with the puritanism of the old Christian woman, which the poet sacrilegeously laughs at in the poem. But Stevens' aim is also more than a mere mockery of the old woman's "hig'-toned" puritanism. The poem, insofar as its serious purpose is concerned, brings out the contrast between the old and the new fictions: the fictions created by the moral or the religious law, and the fiction created by poets. The title combined with the opening line—"Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame"—makes the contrast between the two clear.

SUMMARY

The poem begins by shocking the lady's 'high-toned', religious, rather puritannical, belief in the fictions of her Christia-

nity. The poet-persona introduces the new fiction by saying "Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame." There is a deliberate pun on both the meanings of the word "fiction." In one sense it is real because it deals with something which is concocted by a writer; in the other sense, it is a derivative of the Latin *fingere*, that is, something shaped. The point of the first line is that poetry is the supreme fiction and by implication the Church and Christian theology and mythology are no less fictive, because these two have been shaped by human beings.

One can take the moral law, in case of Christianity the Mosaic law of threatening, negative commandments (Thou shalt not do this, and thou shalt not do that...) and make a church and orthodox religion out of it. The ideas of heaven are thus no more than a religious fiction. The impetus for this fiction, according to Geoffrey Moore, came from "our northern conscience":

> The conscience is converted into palms,
> Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.

In other words, the religious fiction of Christianity was a fictive construct, invented to fill the need for the moral law. About this, says the poet persona, there can be no disagreement: "We agree in principle." But there is also the opposite, secular fiction born out of a contrary, sensuous need: "But take the opposing law and make a peristyle,/And from the peristyle project a masque/Beyond the planets." In other words; if the moral needs have led to the creation of heaven and God, the physical, bachhanial needs of humanity have led the poets to create their own beautiful fictions, in this particular case, the masque. And if the religious fictions lead one, or promise to lead one, to the paradise where one can hear the spiritual music amog the palm-trees, the poetic fiction, unpurged by epitaph, can lead to another heaven of palms, where a more boisterous music of the senses surcharges the whole atmosphere. So, however different the two paradises are, the outcome is similar, says Stevens' poet-persona in an outrageous punning on "palms":

> And palm for palm,
> Madame, we are where we began.

Having established the comparison between the two fictions, the moral and the poetic (or, perhaps, bachhanial and hedonistic) the poet-persona goes on to describe the new planetary music accompanying the fictive, poetic masque. This new heaven will indulge human bawdiness, our pagan desires and not reject them as evil or immoral. The maskers, bachhanials in nature, will be new high priests:

> Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,
> Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade,
> Proud of such novelties of the sublime,
> Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk,

May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves
A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres.

Of course this new fiction, the fiction of bawdiness, will make widow wince (startle and shock them) because of their outrageousness. 'that if this new fiction winks as all fictive things do, it will not be something new. For this new fiction will shock widows like the "high-toned Christian woman" out of their complacent belief in the religious fiction.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Satirical Elements

The poem gives a calculated shock to all puritannical smugness. Geoffrey Moore thinks that it strikes "at the roots of the contemporary American socio-cultural pattern," which is essentially puritanical. The target of immediate attack is the "high-toned" Christian woman, one of the regular church-goers on Sundays and having a holier-than-thou attitude towards agnostics and non-belivers. This is probably why Stevens' attitude towards the woman and her holy fictions is indecorous and impolite. In this regard, Stevens' comedy differs from Meredith's; for Stevens is much less kindly disposed towards the targets of his comic spirit. In fact, Stevens' satire against this "residual piety" of the old woman is so severe that it shocked no less a literary critic then Yvor Winters. Winters remarked, "We learn that the 'moral law' is not necessary as a framework of art, but that the 'opposing law' will do just as well. . . ." It is doubtful, however, if that is exactly what the poem tries to establish. Stevens' aim appears to be much less sinister. shocking though it is to the "high-toned" Christian lady.

The Need for Fictions

If anything, the poem affirms the human need for fictions. As Marius Bewley has noted, "Both the perspectives of the Old Christian Woman and the 'disaffected flagellants' open at east into similar palm-treed vistas, for 'fictive things/Wink as they will.' In other words, the shaping spirit of imagination is transcendent." Susan Weston has also commented on this duality in the poem: "Even at his most iconoclastic—"Sunday Morning" or "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman", for example—Stevens is not merely dismissing Christian doctrine as fictive; he is affirming our need for fictions. Creating fictions is the essential gift of the human mind; believing them is its curse.

Structure and Texture

Despite its calculated strategy of shock, "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" is a fine example of Stevens' firm grasp of poetic structure and effective rhetoric. The whole poem is built on the principle of contrast. If the old woman is "high-toned,"

the proponents of the opposing law are "low-toned," "disaffected flagellants." If the fictions of religions derive from the moral law, the poetic fiction have their source in man's other needs. This new law will express through a bawdy masque much that the residual pieties have all along suppressed. If the heaven of moral law is palm-treed, so is the hedonistic heaven, though each has its own kind of music: in the former case "Windy Citherns" hanker for hymns," in the latter there is the boisterous music of the saxophones. If the one offers a religious ecstay, the other provides a pagan, bachhanal kind of its bawdy ecstasy, with its "tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk." The structuring image is taken from architecture: nave, and peristyles, and quite appropriately because both the fictions construct their own varieties of heavens.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
   Take the moral law and make a nave of it
   And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
   The conscience is converted into palms,
   Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.

Explanation—This opening stanza of Stevens, "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" is addressed to this old Christian lady whose excessive puritanism show a "holier-than-thou" attitude. Shocking her out of her complacency in her religious beliefs, Stevens (or his persona) tells the lady that poetry is the greatest fiction, implying thereby that her religion is also one. For her religion has been derived from one kind of human law, the moral law which Christianity took from Moses' negative commandments ("Thou shalt not...). One can easily concoct a fiction, a religious fiction, out of the moral law of Moses. And this is exactly what, Stevens' persona tells the high-toned lady, her religion basically is. It is the consciousness of man's moral needs which makes him imagine a paradise with palm-trees where he can hope to spend his after-life. For the persona this is nothing but a human need for .hymns. So there is no need to attach any supernatural significance to religious beliefs and rituals. Of course he agrees with the lady that her religious fiction serves a human need, a moral need, but insists that it is no more than that.

2. But take the opposing law and make a peristyle,
   And from the peristyle project a masque
   Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
   Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
   Is equally converted into palms,
   Squiggling like saxophones.

Explanation—In this passages Stevens suggests his own kind of fiction to oppose the moral-religious fiction of the high-toned old Christian woman. Addressing the puritannical lady, perhaps a

regular church-goer and having a holier-than-thou attitude, the poet (or his mouthpiece) says that the opposing law which emphasizes the physical and bodily needs of human beings has as much claim as the religious fiction of the lady. One can easily create a peristyle and from it project a masque, a ritualistic and orgiastic masque bare of all thought of death and heaven. By this law or fiction (which opposes the religious fictions of Christianity) one can conceive a hedonistic heaven on the earth in which the music will be supplied by the squiggling saxophones rather than the church's musical instruments. The two fictions thus have an equal claim, because neither is more than the other. For a hedonist these saxophones can provide a music which is as sweet as the planetary music which a high-toned lady can only imagine.

3. Allow,
Therefore, that in the planetary scene
Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,
Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade,
Proud of such novelties of the sublime,
Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk,
May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves
A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres.
This will make widows wince. But fictive things
Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.

Explanation—This concluding section of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" builds further on the earthly paradise which the persona has already compared with the old lady's conception of heaven. In the masque projected from the peristyle of poetic fiction, a new planetary music will evolve in which the poets and artists will participate very much like bachhanals participating in a frenzied ritual. Their masque and music, a jovial hullabaloo, may create a new heavenly music. Of course, this hedonistic masque and rite will shock and startle a widow like the high-toned old Christian woman. But fictive things, says Stevens' persona, shock as much as other fictions do. But this kind of shock, says the persona, is necessary to bring puritans out of their religious complacencies.

The tone of this concluding section is simply outrageous and deliberately so, since Stevens did not believe in and approve of puritanical beliefs and attitudes. It is a hilarious and debunking satire on such attitudes. The point is not that Stevens' own fiction is superior to the lady's; the purpose of the comparison is simply to deflate the rhetoric of the lady's religious fiction.

6. THE EMPEROR OF ICE CREAM

Introduction

"The Emperor of Ice Cream" is one of Wallace Stevens' most anthologized and most extensively commented upon poems. It exhibits in abundance what Wallace Stevens called the "essential gaudiness of poetry". But, as usual with most Stevens poems, the gaudiness in "The Emperor of Ice Cream" is integral to its structure as well as theme. As R P. Blackmur noted many years ago, this poem might as well be called "Directions for a Funeral, with Two Epitaphs". It consists of two stanzas of eight lines each, with the last line—"The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream" —acting as a refrain.

PARAPHRASE

Let a muscular man, the roller of big cigars and therefore representing a big business tycoon (perhaps an ice cream tycoon) be summoned and asked to prepare aphrodisiac curds in kitchen cups. Let the young girls idle about in the room in the dresses they normally wear (normally, that is, for funerals or on ordinary days?) and let the boys bring fresh flowers (for offering to the dead body as a last tribute, or to young girls as tokens of their love for them?) in last month's newspapers. Let *be*, that is reality, the grand finale of all appearance since the only emperor (one holds sway, or matters) is the emperor of the ice cream (that is, the only reality that matters is the reality of transience, of things and objects in a state of flux).

Let someone (perhasps the "roller of big cigars") take out from the wooden dresser, which has lost three of its glass knobs, the bed-sheet on which she (the woman who is now lying dead) embroidered her favourite symbolic birds, the fantails, long ago. Spread this bed-sheet on her body so that it covers her face, and if it is not long enough to cover the whole body, let her cold and stiff feet remain uncovered. They will only indicate how cold and lifeless they are. Let the lamp (the light of the mind) be trained to concentrate ("fix its beam") on this reality only; for the only reality that matters is the reality of the world in a state of flux. The magnificence that we can achieve in our human state, a magnificence which is delicious but transient, is the only one that matters.

CRITICAL COMMENTS

Contrast

But as the above attempt at a workable paraphrase will have shown, the poem defies paraphrase. The whole poem in fact is built on the principle of a strong contrast between several con-

traries: life and death, youth and age, past and present, poverty and affluence, transience and the ideas of transcendence. If the first stanza presents a picture of hectic activity in the kitchen, and the activity of whipping "concupiscent curds in kitchen cups", the second stanza describes the stillness in the bedroom with its focus on the centrally placed dead body on an old woman who died in poverty (her dresser is lacking three glass-knobs; there is only one sheet, and that too quite short, to cover her body with; and there are, of course, her "horny feet", the feet of an old working woman). The woman who is now dead was certainly old, but the girls and boys who are idling away their time in courtship are young and attractive. If there is hustle and bustle among these boys and girls, and also in the kitchen where the "roller of big cigars" is asked to "whip concupiscent curds", there is the cold, inactive body of the dead woman in the bedroom. If the roller of the big cigars" is indeed a rich business tycoon, the woman was extremely poor. Again, if the flowers brought for offering are fresh, the newspapers in which they are wrapped are old ("last month's"). If the mind often likes to look beyond the immediate reality and indulges in constructing philosophies and idealisms, let it also be trained to fix its beam on the magnificence of the life in a state of flux. The whole poem is thus built on a principle of strong contrast beween opposites.

Ambiguity

The poem is at the same time characterized by its ambiguity. The President of the Ice Cream Manufacturers' Association asked Stevens what he precisely meant by "The Emperor of Ice Cream". Stevens himself at one time said that he chose the "ice cream" because his daughter liked it. The fact remains that most critics took the "emperor of ice cream" as meaning the reality of death. Michael Zimmerman, however, tried to relate the emperor to imagination which he calls an abnormal force. Then there is also the question: why ice cream? Stevens' answer won't suffice because whatever the reasons underlying the choice of this symbol, the fact remains that "ice cream" is something simultaneously delicious, titillating and yet wholly transient.

There are, in addition, other ambiguities and obscurities. As indicated in the parenthetical material in the paraphrase of the poem, it is hard to say with certainty whether the girls are asked to wear their usual everyday dress or a funeral dress. It is a small matter apparently, but it makes a tremendous difference in the attitude. If the dress is ordinary, everyday dress, it makes the girls' visit look like a picnic, especially when "concupiscent curds" are whipped in the kitchen. If the dress they are to wear is a mourning dress, it would suggest a traditional form of mourning. Similarly, the flowers the boys are asked to bring create a problem: are these flowers meant as an offering to the dead woman, or as

tokens of love to the girls whom they will meet in the funeral? Again, if the rhythmic thrust of the poem emphasizes that death is to be accepted as a routine matter and a wake may be taken as a festive occasion (as in some parts of the world, notably in Western Ireland, where a wake is used for heavy drinking by the side of the dead body), the very visual image of death in the second stanza suggests transience, mortality, and the horrible fact of age, poverty and death. In fact, as the drama of courtship and the reality of death go hand in hand, it is difficult to say with certainty which of the two is to be taken more seriously. The juxtaposition is brilliant but no less teasing for that reason.

Conclusion

It is ambiguity of this kind that has led many sharp divisions among its commentators. Richard Ellman, for example, remarks that in this poem Stevens shows the right way to conduct a funeral. R.P. Blackmur, commenting on the two couplets observes, "The less obvious sense of the couplets is more difficult to set down because, in all its difference, it rises out of the first sense, and while contradicting and supplanting, yet guarantees it. The connotations is perhaps, that ice cream and what it represents is the only power *heeded*, not the only power there is to heed. The irony recoils on itself; what seems *shall* finally be; the lamp *shall* affix its beam. The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream. The king is dead; long live the king." The poem is in fact a curious and fascinating blend of oddity and charm, seriousness and mocking irreverence. To conclude in the words of William York Tindall, "The Emperor of Ice Cream" owes its effect to unions of the grotesque and the quotidian, seeming and being, compassion and fun. However, grotesque, death and the wake are part of life. The image of ice-cream concentrates these meanings. At once cold and agreeable, ordinary and festive, it is a symbol of life and death. Imperative mood and the finality of the rhymed couplets add as much to this strange composition as the commonplace details. . . . The interaction of such elements, as we have noticed, is one of Stevens' constant means".

EXPLANATION

1. Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Explanation—In this first stanza of "The Emperor of Ice Cream" Wallace Stevens describes the activity going on in the

kitchen of the old lady who is lying dead in her bed room. The roller of big-cigars, and therefore representing a healthy muscular man, is sought to be summoned and to take control of the funeral proceedings. Let him prepare aphrodisiac curds in the kitchen cups (whether for funeral libations, or just for the refreshment of the "mourners" we do not know; nor are we told about it). Let young beautiful girls move about idly in the room in the dress that they normally wear (and not in black, mourning dresses). Let the boys bring flowers as tribute to the dead lady (or to the young girls?) in last month's newspapers. Let reality be the finale (the culmination) of all appearance. For the only reality that governs this world is the flux, as transient, and yet, titillating, as ice-cream.

This stanza shows Stevens' attitude towards death which he considers part of life and not the tragedy that puts an end to it. For him it is life in the flux that matters and not any abstract fictions about after-life, death, and paradise, etc. Most significantly, he emphasizes that death, being a part of life, should be taken as such and not a tragic event.

2. Take from the dresser of deal.
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb,
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Explanation—After having described the movement of life in the kitchen, Stevens now focuses on the dead body of the old woman and the poverty prevailing in the house. The roller of big-cigars is now instructed to take out from the dresser of deal which is without the three glass-knobs it once had (this shows how old and cheap the furniture in the house is), the sheet on which the lady (when she was alive) embroidered fantails (suggestive of Venus's doves) once. This sheet is to be used to cover the dead body. If the sheet is not big enough to cover the whole body, let the dead woman's horny feet remain uncovered. There is nothing to feel shocked because the horny feet simply show how cold and dumb they are (and by implication how cold and dumb the woman now is). Let the lamp of imagination affix its beam (let the mind focus) on this reality and recognize that the only reality that governs this universe is the reality of the flux, which is symbolized in the transient but titillating image of ice-cream.

This closing stanza of "The Emperor of Ice Cream" thus emphasizes Stevens' view that death is part of life and has to be accepted as such. The projections about death, after-life and paradise, etc., are immaterial; what is real is man's existence in the world of change, and death itself is an example of that change.

SUNDAY MORNING

Introduction

"Sunday Morning", written in 1623, is Stevens' most famous poem; it is also one of the best-known American poems of the twentieth century. It is an ardent poetic plea for challenging and discarding all illusions, notably those provided by religion. At the same time, it emphasizes the glory and the bliss that this physical world offers, despite mutability and mortality which prevail in it. In this respect "Sunday Morning" is a great agnostic poem, true to the spirit of the twentieth century. It consists of eight stanzas of exactly fifteen lines of lyrical bank verse in each. The title—"Sunday Morning"—has a pun in it, for in one sense it means a Sunday Morning traditionally reserved for prayers in the church; in the second sense, however, it means a sun-day, a day dedicated to the worship of the secular sun-god that Stevens projects by the end of the poem. Inclusive in the second sense is also the holiday mood on a bright sunny day a holiday in Christiandom. The choice of the title is therefore suggestive.

STANZA-WISE SUMMARY

Stanza 1

The first stanza provides the setting of the poem: the protagonist, a rich Christian lady is enjoying her breakfast on her terrace on a sunny, Sunday morning, in an atmosphere of comfort, pleasure and luxury. But the thought that she should be in the church offering prayers, rather than on her terrace, makes her feel guilty. She thinks of the great sacrifice of Christ in Palestine centuries ago. As a result of this thinking, her present comfort is disturbed and her mind filled with thoughts of this ancient catastrophe.

Stanza 2

As the lady is lost in her thoughts of ancient "silent Palestine" and the crucifixion there, her mind momentarily recoils: Why should she give her bounty to the dead and lose her present comfort? How can a divinity that comes to her only in silent shadows and dreams have a meaning for her, especially when she finds a lot of comfort, variety and pleasantness in her present world? The truly divine must live within her. She should rather concentrate on her immediate present and the world in it, and accept all the joys, varieties, changes, and grievings that it brings.

Stanza 3

Jove was too inhuman a god to have any meaningful relationship with mankind. He was rather despotic and tyrannical. No wonder, people rejected this inhuman god as soon as the divine

and the human mingled in Christ. This new divinity was in any case more appealing. This is a logical step to usher in a purely human god, or no god, and this is what Stevens does. The protagonist is now urged to discard all traditional religious thoughts. If she does so, she will find her world much more friendlier than now. In any case the reality of this world is the only reality that we know.

Stanza 4

The protagonist of the poem now admits that she feels perfectly at home in her physical world but she still cannot forget the ideas of perpetual bliss in heaven. The poet (or the persona) then exhorts her to discard all old myths, prophecies, and ideas about heaven and paradise. The beautiful earth is more real than any paradise in after-life.

Stanza 5

The stanza repeats the lady's feeling that there is some need for a perpetual bliss. The narrator of the poem tells her that it is our mortality which is the originator of all beauty. It is death which gives beauty and meaning to life. Mortality is thus a gift and not a curse, and if one thinks of "imperishable bliss" in after-life, one had better give up such thoughts.

Stanza 6

This stanza provides a gloss on the idea that "Death is the mother of beauty". The paradise in which people believe is something quite static and unchanging. There is, therefore, no point in hoping for it. What is worse, the paradise, as conceived by mankind, is nothing but a boring, dull, duplicate of the best in this world.

Stanza 7

This stanza demarcates the boundaries of the earthly paradise, and propounds a new religion, the religion in which the sun will not be a god, but as a god might be. The rest of the stanza is a ritualistic chant in praise of this earthly paradise.

Stanza 8

The concluding stanza marks a final rejection of Christ and religious fictions. What happened in ancient Palestine was a matter of particular place and particular time. The tomb of Christ symbolizes nothing but the grave of Christ. The lady must accept the procession of events, live amid the process of change, enjoy it and forget about any paradise in an after-life.

CRITICAL COMMENTS

The Development of Thought

"Sunday Morning" is an early but highly poetic statement of Stevens' categorical rejection of a traditional heaven and divinity, and an affirmation of his "supreme fiction" about an earthly paradise. It begins with a note of comfort and relaxation surrounding the Christian lady in her terrace on a Sunday Morning and takes her gradually to an acceptance of the earthly paradise where the sun will preside, "not as a god, but as a god might be." Stanza I thus provides the setting and the tone, emphasizing the lady's luxury and her guilt-feeling about enjoying her present comfort while her neighbours have gone to church.

The second stanza challenges this submission before the dead. What is divinity if it can come only in silent shadows and dreams? Divinity should not be external, but something internal. Are not there things to be enjoyed and cherished in this world? The reality of direct sensory experience is much more than ideas about a mythic god and ancient sacrifice.

The third stanza then outlines the origin of the concepts of godhead and heaven. The ancient Greeks thought of Jove as a monarch among men, but Christians preferred a more human and friendly god represented by Christ. Today the time has come to reject even Christ much in the same way as the ancient people rejected the godhead of Jove. But the Christian lady is still not satisfied and her thoughts go back to something beyond the earth, to traditional heaven. But the poet assures her that "there is not any haunt of prophecy,/Nor any chimera of the grave". The reality of the traditional heaven is not as enduring as the reality of sensations, of variety, and of change in this physical world. The woman agrees but still feels the need for "some imperishable bliss".

Stanza fifth then demolishes this "need" by ascertaining that real bliss is to be found in change and variety, not in a static immortality. Death has for us the fatal attractiveness of the willow in old poetry for the lovelorn maidens. As Geoffrey Moore succinctly paraphrases Stevens' argument: "Death, the all-consuming, all important fact of Death, in a world which is here and now and only here and now, gives point to our lives and is in fact the 'mother of beauty' since it makes us realize the bitter-sweetness of the human situation."

The next stanza sixth further builds on this argument, emphasizing the tediousness of a permanent heaven and by asserting that the traditional heaven is nothing but a boring substitute of this earth: there is no change of seasons in the paradise; the fruit there never falls; the boughs always hang heavily; the rivers never find the seas they seem to run towards. It is ironical that the concept of paradise should make it such a boring duplicate of the earth.

Stanza seventh then propounds the idea of an earthly paradise in which the sun will be the central figure. This earthly paradise, in the words of Adelaide K. Mooris, "is the imagination's gift, a grace which falls as the dew falls to refresh and irridiate the world. Through imagination, earth becomes, as no mythic land or ethereal heaven could, 'a part of labor and pain,' as supple and as turbulent as the men who, caught in its joys, chant the 'chant of paradise,/Out of their blood".

In the eighth stanza which concludes the poem, the conversion on the protagonist is complete:

> She hears, upon that water without sound,
> A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
> Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
> It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay".

There is momentary shock at this rejection of Christ and divinity:

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
> Of that wide water, inescapable.

But even this momentary sadness is part of the beauty of the earth. Life with all its changes, including the final change of death, is beautiful and rich, and in any case much more real than the paradise imagined by man. As Joseph Riddel comments on this stanza, "Isolation is the human condition and death man's long sponsor. The poem's concluding metaphor, of natural life describing in 'Ambiguous undulations' a ritualistic circle around the center of darkness, dramatizes Stevens' basic figure of the relation of life and death: the tension produced by life's vital resistance to the insensible center toward which all mortal things are drawn."

Artistic Beauty, Richness and Complexity

Apart from the radical thought that it presents, "Sunday Morning" is an immensely rich and beautiful poem. The blank verse employed is highly lyrical and Wordsworthian. The diction is biblical at times, but Wordsworthian description of nature as well as biblical phrasing are deliberately employed as contrived blasphemies, The principle of contrast that governs "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" and many other Stevens poems is used brilliantly in "Sunday Morning" as well. The traditional paradise is juxtaposed with the earthly paradise. The "Sunday Morning" on the title is used in two senses simultaneously: the Sunday which reminds all Christians of Christ's sacrifice and of the need for prayer and worship, and the "sun-day" with its bright sunshine, natural beauty, earthly comfort and luxury. The whole poem, says Mooris, becomes Stevens' 'Sunday Morning' service, consecrated to earth. It

"dispels the hush of puritan Sundays with the boisterous, brilliant freedom of the sun which, in Stevens' transvaluation, is neither Christ nor the divine light but the 'savage source' of life itself. The poet-priest conducts the service with a catechism and an incantation redefining the sacred as the responsive and the perceptive in human feeling: the passions, grievings, elations, and emotions which must now be 'cherished like the thought of heaven'. Man's pleasures and pains replace the monotonous perfections of heaven's 'imperishable bliss'."

This poem, as James Baird has said, is thoroughly sun-drenched. And this is quite appropriate because it enunciates the new religion of the sun on this earth. Speaking of the artistic beauty of this poem, David Daiches has recently remarked, "The slow gravity of the verse, the musical eloquence of the poem's movement together with the touches of surprise and cunning in the imagery, produce an extraordinarily impressive effect. This is not one of Stevens' gaudy poems. It does not exhibit his parading his ability to face experience with 'a supreme fiction'. It operates in a more subdued mode, although with no less skill, than his more exhibitionist poems."

EXPLANATIONS OF PASSAGES

Stanza 1

Stevens' "Sunday Morning" opens on a note of comfort and relaxation. The protagonist of the poem, a Christian lady in her comfortable peignoir (a nightgown) is having her breakfast on her sunny terrace on a Sunday morning. The breakfast consists of coffee and fresh oranges. There is an atmosphere of comfort and luxury surrounding her: the green freedom of the cockatoo (a crested parrot), the pleasant sunshine, the luxurious, expensive rug, and a relaxed holiday mood. all combine together to dissipate all thoughts of an ancient sacrifice which Christ made to redeem mankind. But the thought that she is enjoying the pleasant sunshine while she should be in the church remembering Christ's sacrifice, takes her back to the old myth dealing with crucifixion. As she is absorbed in her guilty feelings, the pleasant environment begins to undergo a change, consistent with her thinking. Her comfortable green surroundings, the green wings of the cockatoo and the pungent oranges, are now seen as part of an ancient holy procession. Her mind begins to travel back over the vast water and takes her back to silent Palestine, the dominion of blood and Christ's sacrifice. Ironically, the very stillness of her surroundings makes her dream of an unhappy far-off event in the distant past. As a result her present comfort is disturbed and she suffers from a guilt-consciousness. The silent and distant past thus dissipates the joys of the present.

Stanza 2

As she is lost in thoughts of "silent Palestine" (silent because it is so distant in both time and space) and crucifixion, the lady recoils: why should she give her bounty to the dead? In other words, why should she feel so gloomy about a death that occurred nearly two thousand years ago? In any case, what reality should that divinity have for her which comes to her only in silent shadows and dreams and disturbs her present? Should she not ignore all thoughts of divinity and rejoice in the beauty, comfort and variety that she finds in her present world? Should she not, instead, look within and seek divinity there? Or at least in this living world of the sun, in these vivid and sensory surroundings? The truly divine must be in this world and within her; it resides in her varying moods, the changing human situations, the changing natural scenery, and the change of seasons. It is after all the perception of all these things which make up the reality of a personal experience. In this stanza, thus, as Marie Borroff observes, "The woman is exhorted to practise a complete identification of the self with the natural landscape in its seasonal changes. She is to experience 'passions' not 'in rain' but 'of rain', directly reflecting and in a sense consisting of the weather itself. Her 'moods of winter' will similarly be both occasional and defined by watching the snow as it falls'. Her curriculumn emphasizes grief as much as joy and it is to be pursued in solitude, 'within herself,' 'in lonliness.' Her 'elations' or lifting up of the heart will have their sufficient cause in the upward surge of life in spring trees."

Stanza 3

The third stanza begins with an impression of the inhuman, mythical god: Jove or Zeus. Jove was too inhuman, mythical and despotic to have any meaningful relation with human beings. The concept of his godhead was that of an absolute monarch who treated mankind with the condescension a king shows towards his subjects. Ultimately, with the mingling of the divine in the human blood through the birth of Christ, the concept of godhead changed. The birth of Christ and the beginning of Christianity thus substituted a human divinity and thereby satisfied man's innate desire for a human and unabsolute Absolute. The next step suggested is the rejection of this "unabsolute Absolute" as well in favour of the divinity that is within her and her physical world. Implicit in the comparison of the Greek and the Christian mythologies is the possibility for the creation of a new divinity which the poem recommends. The protagonist is then advised to think of her own world and dismiss all thoughts of heaven. This real world, Stevens' persona in the poem, argues, is not after all bad or ignoble: For if the inherited thoughts about heaven and divinity are ignored, the sky will appear to be much more friendly than it seems at present; it will not be so indifferent to human pain and love Nor will it be any the less in its glory. In any case the things of this world

are all that we know for certain, whereas the legends and myths about gods in the past, about divinity and paradise, are only taken on faith. Why prefer them to the comforts and luxuries of this world?

Stanza 4

The Christian protagonist of the poem now admits that she feels perfectly at home in this world which has beauty, richness and variety. Before migrating, the birds test the reality of the misty fields, but after their flight one wonders what happens. In other words, the reality of the present moment is undeniable, but what about the reality of the world that comes after the present life? Is there no eternity, or paradise where one can relax changelessly for ever? For the natural, physical world may be a paradise but it is after all impermanent. Stevens' persona in the poem then assures Christian lady that none of the old, haunting prophecies, myths or visions have been or will ever be as real as the physical experience of natural beauty. Nor will any of these myths about heaven be as permanent or enduring as the natural landscape in its changing moods and seasons. All thoughts of old prophecies, of Christ's resurrection and Christian paradise, or of the Greek Isles of the Blessed have hardly any reality about them. On the other hand, the beauty of the natural landscape will continue to attract all those who respond to it, remember it and long for it. In other words, the beautiful natural world is more real, no matter how changing it is, than the Greek or Christian paradise.

Stanza 5

The next stanza, stanza 5, begins with the remark of the Christian lady that even in her present happiness she still feels the need of some religious belief in some "imperishable bliss". The poet's persona then replies by saying that our appreciation of beauty is sharpened by our awareness that life will one day end. If we lived for ever, our experience of beauty will not perhaps be so attractive, or so sharp as it is when we know that death will come one day and put an end to our experience. As J.V. Cunningham paraphrases the persona's argument at this point, "Even though death be in fact the obliteration of all human experience, yet it is attractive to us; it has the fatal attractiveness of the willow in old poetry for the lovelorn maiden. Though she has lovers who bring her gifts—that is, the earth and its beauty—she disregards the lovers and tasting of the gifts, strays impassioned toward death". Thus although time and change may cause forgetfulness of both joys and sorrows, they also bring in their train maturity and more valuable emotions. In other words, as Geoffrey Moore points out, "Death the all-consuming, all-important fact of Death, in a world which is here and now and only here and now, gives point to our lives and is in fact the 'mother' of beauty since it makes us realize the bittersweetness of the human situation".

Stanza 6

This stanza provides a gloss on the idea that "Death is the mother of beauty," the idea that governs the preceding stanza. The poet's persona presents a mocking vision of our traditional concept of paradise and eternity in which nothing changes and in which there is always spring. In that unearthly paradise of traditional imagination there is no movement from unripeness to ripeness; there the fruit never falls from the tree; and there is absolutely nothing of the procession of changes brought about on the earth by the change of seasons. There is, therefore, no point in pinning our hopes on this mythical, unchangeable paradise. What is more, Stevens ironically comments that the mythic paradise is fashioned after our own thoughts about the earth: "Alas, that they should wear our colours there!" Worse still, the paradise woman hopes to gain after death is nothing but only an eternal duplicate of this earth and lacking even the principle of change. The point of the argument is this: Why reject the earth and run after a paradise which is not only a duplicate of this world but even very tiring because of its changelessness? For, as he has already argued in the preceding stanza, there cannot be any sharp appreciation of beauty without change and death. So nothing is gained by thinking of a paradise after death: the Christian lady had better concentrated on the reality, beauty, richness and variety that characterize this earth.

Stanza 7

In the penultimate stanza Stevens (or his mouthpiece) outlines the boundaries of the earthly paradise that the Christian protagonits of the poem is exhorted to believe in and enjoy. What is propounded is the new religion of the sun, with sun "not as a god, but as god might be" at the centre of this earthly paradise. This reminds one of Whitman's Adamic devotion to the sun. But, as Joseph Riddel has noted, the "pagan chant is ritualized and restrained, and the suppliants yearn for no heavenly diadems". This ritualistic chant of the devotees of the sun will come from within themselves and will be echoed by the sky, and thus become "a chant of paradise." Then the devotees of this new god will enter the beauty of the earth, find angels in valleys, hills and trees. They will enjoy the friendship of their fellow-men like the fellowship of the angels in the traditional paradise, although they will also recognize that the friends on this earth will change and die. This is not a loss because, as the poet has already established, "Death is the mother of beauty". This stanza thus provides what, according to J.V. Cunningham, is "an undivine fiction that preserves the emotions of the old religion but attaches them to a poetry in which the sensory objects of a natural landscape enter into a union of celebration of the mortality of man". Cunningham also notes how this biblical phrasing "creates a blasphemous religion of mortality". But it can also be said with equal justification that artistically

Stevens here recaptures Wordsworth's mood in nature without of course his attempt to seek the spirit there.

Stanza 8

The last stanza, stanza 8, makes a final rejection of Christ and divinity. What took place in ancient Palestine happened in a particular space and time. It was part of the "great procession of events which is life in motion". The tomb in Palestine is not something spiritual or divine; it is, instead, the tomb of Jesus Christ and at best symbolizes his martyrdom. Christy's sacrifice, which so disturbed the lady at the beginning of the poem, is dismissed as a temporal martyrdom. So the Christian lady must accept the procession of events and the inevitability of the process of change, for we live immediately in the "chaos" of time where, as Riddel comments, "pleasure and pain are necessary complements." The stanza, according to David Daiches, advises the lady to accept time, "the wide world of nature, the whole universe exists in time and space, and as our imagination ranges over it we can sense the sad beauty of a time-bond reality. The sadness is part of the beauty. The bird as it flies 'downward to darkness, on extended wings' becomes a symbol of the brevity of the individual life—but also of its beauty, its satisfaction, its haunting, time-conditioned reality." In the words of Joseph Riddel, "In the lines man without myth, without God, without anything but the universe which has produced him, is given extraordinarily pure and touching grandeur".

8. ANECDOTE OF THE JAR

Introduction

"Anecdote of the Jar" (1916) is Stevens' early exploration of the question whether order exists in Nature or it is man's imagination and his creative acts, which impose order on it. On the surface, this poem is a simple allegory of a jar placed on a hill in Tennessee, a jar which somehow transforms the wilderness that surrounds it. But like many of Stevens' poems it has led to a lot of commentary and critical controversy.

The title of the poem makes it one of anecdotes. The word "anecdote", as Adalaide Mooris defines it, "is from the Greek *anekdota*, meaning unpublished items, usually historical or biographical. Unlike the parable, which is a sophisticated, stylized fabrication in illustration of a moral lesson, the anecdote is traditionally a simple, factual account of an episode inherently entertaining. Whereas the parable is true in its fiction, the anecdote is supposed to be true in its facts; whereas the one is produced by imagination, the other is a product of reality". But as Mooris adds, "For Stevens. . . there are no convenient and clear-cut

distinction between fact and fiction or between reality and imagination, and he takes a perverse joy in blending anecdote and parable." The word "anecdote" in the title of this poem, therefore, has to be taken in this light: the episode of the poet's placing a jar on a hill in Tennessee may be an actual event; it might as well be a parable to illustrate the point that order in the world is after all a human formulation rather than something inherent in the nature of things.

SUMMARY

The first stanza describes the jar that the poet (or persona) places in a hill on Tennessee. The jar was round in shape, a shape that had been given by the artist. As soon as this jar was placed on the hill it made the confused and disordered wilderness surround the whole hill. In other words, the very placing of the jar on the hill made one aware of the difference between the shaped jar and the unshaped, slovenly wilderness.

The second stanza describes the effect of the placing of the jar on the hill. As soon as the jar was placed, the wilderness surrounding the hill "rose" up to the jar and it was no longer wild: for the placing of the jar had provided a centre, a focus to the slovenly wilderness. The last two lines of this stanza then describe the jar as it gains in point by having been placed on the hill: it appeared to be tall and of a "port" in the air.

The third stanza continues with the interaction of the jar and its surroundings. Soon the jar begin to dominate the whole scene, though it was a bare and gray-coloured man-made object. It did not have the capacity to create anything out of it; it could give birth to neither birds nor bushes, something which the hill, despite its slovenly wilderness, could and can do. What is more, it was not like anything found in nature because it was, after all, a man-made artifact.

CRITICAL COMMENTS

Contrast

The poem is built on the central tension between the jar and the hill in Tennessee on which it was placed. The jar suggests man, imagination, and art; the wilderness, on the other hand suggests nature, reality, and unembellished chaos. The jar is accompanied by long-vowel sounds: *placed*, *round*, *surround*, *ground*, *tall*; of *port in air*, *gray and bare*: The hill and the slovenly wilderness is accompanied by hissing sounds: *slovenly*, *sprawled*, *bush*, *else*, *Tennessee*. A further contrast is to be found in the prolific productivity in the otherwise slovenly wilderness, whereas the jar is barren: It did not give of/bird or bush/Like nothing else in Tennessee. The wilderness *gives* and *gives of*; but the jar can only

take. If Nature of the slovenly wilderness is quite real, alive, and life-giving, the jar is purely a human artifact, man-made, bare, and barren.

Theme

It is by means of this strong contrast that the poet illustrates the central theme of the poem: the tension between art and nature, imagination and reality, order and unshaped wilderness or chaos. Undeniably, the central theme is the theme of interaction between nature and art, or reality and imagination. Critical opinion, however, differs as to the precise resolution of the tension between the opposites. At one time Stanley P. Chase confidently wrote: ". . . the little poem is meant to suggest nothing more than the superiority of the simplest of handicraft over any extent of unregulated nature". O'Connor spoke of the jar "imposing its order" on the wilderness. Yvor Winters, however, argues that although the jar dominates the wilderness, "it does not give order to the wilderness—it is vulgar and sterile, and it transforms the wilderness into the semblance of a deserted picnic ground". Howard Baker takes these conflicting viewpoints into consideration and concludes:" "The jar itself—simple and symmeterical, a product of the human consciousness and not of nature—is a very fitting symbol for man's dominion over nature. The appearance of the wilderness is deftly suggested; in contrast with it the jar is striking, but, after some familiarity with the poem, it is striking chiefly because it is so precisely an opposite to the wilderness".

Ambiguity

There is still some ambiguity about the smooth surfaces of this poem. The question—Does the jar provide an order to the slovenly wilderness, or is it the "slovenly wilderness" which makes the jar appear so "tall and of a port in the air"?—is difficult to answer one-sidely. If the jar has shape and art, it is bare and barren, whereas there is colour and vitality in the slovenly wilderness. The result of this ambiguity, as C.D. Narasimhaiah has recently pointed out, is a division in our loyalties. We do not know for certain which of the two, Nature and Art, should command our "unqualified allegiance". But, if this poem is read with one of the "order" poems, notably the "Idea of Order at Key West", the poem's thrust seems to be in favour of imagination which acts as an ordering principle over the wilderness, the unshapely chaos of reality. It is art, no matter how much unreal or man-made it is, which imposes some order on reality, whether it is the reality of Nature or of human experience.

Structure and Versification

"Anecdote of the Jar" despite the conflicting opinions about its central theme is, however, a very rich poem in its structure and texture. It consists of three stanzas of four lines each and has an

architectural structure. Acçording to Robert Pack, the jar and hill ". . . become circles within the larger circles of the 'slovenly wilderness,' exerting a pressure that shapes things into a geometric figuration". William York Tindall, commenting on the form and diction of the poem, observes, "Unrhymed couplets lead up to two end-stopped lines, set off by rhyme. This premature finality lends an air of unfinality to the end, another unrhymed couplet, which, however, by returning to Tennessee joins end to beginning rounding things out. Internal rhymes and repetition, assuring coherence, emphasize the interacting contraries. 'Round' and 'ground' pointing central meanings out by sound, are confirmed by 'around' and 'surround.' The climactic end-rhymes, 'everywhere' and 'bare', restate the conflict. . . . The shape is tight and bare, the diction lean; but question arise. Why Tennessee? Is the jar empty or full? The raising of question is a virtue of shape". This small poem is thus quite rich artistically, and that is why it has often been compared with Keats' "Ode on the Grecian Urn."

EXPLANATIONS OF PASSAGES

Stanza 1

"Anecdote of the Jar" is a poem about the relationship between the shaped products of art and the unshaped things in nature. Stevens illustrates this basic thematic issue of the poem by creating a situation. He says that he placed a jar on a hill in Tennessee. A product of art; the jar was round in shape. As soon as it was placed on the hill, it made the viewer aware of the contrast beween its own artistic shape and the slovenly wilderness of the hill which surrounded it now. In other words, "the wildness which was sprawling without any pattern or coherence and would have remained unnoticed now became an object of contemplation, thanks to the jar. The jar imposed an order on the wildness, invested it with a meaning and made it real". (Narasimhaiah)

Stanza 2

This stanza describes the immediate effect of the placing of the jar on the hill in Tennessee. As soon as the jar was placed, the wildness surrounding the hill at once "rose" up to it and surrounded it. As such it no longer remained wild because it provided a setting for the jar, which had by now become the centre of focus. The jar was round and of a portly shape, and it invested the surroundings with a new shape which had not been there before. The work of art had thus established its dominion and given shape to the wilderness of unshaped nature around it. This factor has led critics to assume that Stevens emphasizes the superiority of art over nature. The fact seems to be, though, that Stevens has juxtaposed the two to bring out their interrelationship rather than emphasize the superiority of one over the other. For, as the last stanza makes it clear, there is a basic tension between the bare, barren but otherwise shaped jar and the slovenly, wild but otherwise fecund nature around this artifact.

Stanza 3

As soon as the jar was placed on the hill in Tennessee, it took dominion everywhere. It gathered the slovenly wilderness around it and invested it with a pattern which it lacked hithertofore. Yet, interestingly enough, the jar was simply gray and empty. It did not have the capacity to produce birds or bushes, a capacity which the fecund wilderness has in abundance. Stevens thus does not romanticize art and establish its superiority over nature; his purpose is rather to bring into sharp focus the contrast between these two. As C.D. Narasimhaiah has noted, Stevens' "stand seems to be that while Art imposes some kind of order on Nature, it is still Nature's privilege to tease us by its hidden mystery. It is true that Art provides the focal point and sensitizes us to discern the beauty of Nature. In fact it is the jar which drew our attention to the mystery that was inherent in the sprawling wildness. But Art has its limitations. In the very disorder of Nature there is colour, there is vitality, there is mystery which must contain further possibilities lying unrevealed and waiting to be discovered while the perfection of the jar forbids any further exploration".

9. THE BIRD WITH THE COPPERY, KEEN CLAWS

Introduction

"The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" belongs to the *Harmonium* group of Stevens' early poems. Relying heavily on Stevens' colour symbolism, this poem has posed considerable difficulties for its commentators. The central symbol, the "parakeet of parakeets" has been variously interpreted, and it is on the decoding of this symbol that any interpretation of the poem finally hinges. Of the many implications considered for the master-parakeet, the most common has been imagination, but claims have also been made for taking it as a symbol of reason. Still another possibility, suggested by the symbol of Azcan in "Bantamps in Pine-Woods," is that of a master poet surrounded by the inchling poets, in the present case the parakeets. The following summary and critical commentary eclectically consider the possibilities of "imagination" and "master-poet" or "archetypal poet" for the "parakeet of parakeets," and summarize Daniel Fuchs's view in favour of "reason" at the end.

SUMMARY

Stanza 1

The poem consists of six tercets (small stanzas of three lines each). The opening stanza provides the necessary setting of the poem and identifies the master-parakeet among other parakeets in

the green tropical forest of parakeets (a parakeet is a small parrot with long tail). It is in this forest that the master or the archetypal parakeet occupies his central position. This quintessential bird is described as the seed ("pip") of life sitting among a group of mortal ("mort," indicating death) tails (synecdochically for the parakeets).

Stanza 2

The second stanza carries on the description of the surroundings as well as the focus on the master-parakeet. The master-parakeet is surrounded by "rudiments of the tropics" (the tropics here suggest the clear light of reason) as well as the greenery of the tropical forest and thereby the scope for imagination). There are ivory white aloe plants around as well as the pears with rust-coloured outside skins. The eyelids of the master-parakeet are white, suggesting his blindness.

The forest is the potential of imagination because of its greenness. The parakeets, like the bantams in "Bantams in Pine-Wood", are word-symbols of different imaginers, possibly poets. The master-parakeet is the possessor of life and therefore an immortal pervasive presence among the mortal minor imaginers or poets. Though blind, the master-parakeet prevails while other parakeets do not.

Stanza 3

Stevens makes it clear, however, that though the figure described is a master-parakeet, he is not a symbol for paradise. The point is that he is not to be taken as symbolic of the undying soul (in Stevens' hedonism, there is hardly any room for religious concepts). Though he is bathed in the ethereal gold, the master-parakeet is not an idol. If at all he seems to be one, he is only a central figure on the paradise of the earth, not in the paradise of religion. He does not speak or see, but presides over the surroundings as an ethereal policeman ("alguazil").

Stanza 4

Plume upon plume ("panache upon panache") his tails or feathers spread both upward and outward in green-vented (imagination coloured) forms. His crest ("tip") is "a drop of water full of storms" (storms indicated weather). The point is that the master-parakeet remains unaffected by any change in the seasons.

Stanza 5

The penultimate tercet describes the master-parakeet as an unmoved Mover (a term used in religion for God). The colours of his turbulent feathers seem to move and thereby indicate the existence of intellect, but still the bird does not move on his

coppery, keen claws. The bird is the law-giver and the mover, but he himself remains above his laws and is not at all moved despite his capacity to move others.

Stanza 6

In the last tercet he "munches a dry shell" (that is, a dry rind or outside skin of a fruit) while he exerts his will. Yet he never ceases to shine brightly in the sun-pallor of the rock (rock is, for Stevens, a symbol of solid reality). The sun-pallor is sun-whiteness and relates to the whiteness of the lids covering the eyes of the master-parakeet. It can cause sun-brilliance to the opening eyes of the poets or individual imaginers during their brief life on the rock (the earth).

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Images and Symbols

As suggested in the introduction above, the whole poem is a a rich fabric of colour and bird symbolism, defying paraphrase and commentary. Seen as a symbol of imagination, the master-parakeet, the "parakeet of parakeets", appears as a god-like figure in an aesthetically satisfying background. As James Baird decodes some of the symbols, "The forest is the green potential of the imagination. The parakeets, like the bantams, are bird-symbols of posts, of separate imaginers. The parakeet of parakeets is the presence of the *central man*, here transformed as the central imagination in human continuity. Thus the master-parkeet is the possessor of the seed of life amidst the constant deaths of the "Peacocks in 'Domination of the Black'." So if the feathers of separate imaginers perish, the central presence of the master-parakeet still prevails. But, as Stevens is at pains to emphasize, there is nothing heavenly about the master bird. He is not of the paradise, not even a symbol for it. Though bathed in the gold of the sun, he looks like an idol, yet he is in the forest on the rock. He is the law-giver, like the prime mover, yet he himself remains an unmoved mover. The law he gives is clear enough; man shall imagine, and imagine on the rock of reality. In other words human imagination must be based on reality even when it is bathed in the glory of the sun's gold. The images of green here indicate the potentialities for imagination; the parakeet of parakeets becomes a symbol of central imagination; "sun-pallor" indicates sun-brilliance, while the rock suggests, as usual in Stevens' poetry, the solid earthly reality. Seen thus, the individual lines gain in meaning: for example, separate imaginers may perish or fail in their imagination, but imagination is a human need and so it cannot perish.

Divergence of Opinion

Daniel Fuchs, however, takes the master-parakeet is a symbol of human reason. According to him, it is the "omnipotent. the omniscient," "impassive principle of pure intellect .... For all his

magnificence, the king of the parakeets remains a caricature of a god of reason, an unmoved mover indeed." But this interpretation creates a few difficulties. Stevens makes it clear that the parakeet is not an idol, nor is it of paradise. Secondly, reason cannot be presented as something blind, though it is quite possible to describe imagination as a blind and unrealistic force, compelling people to indulge in flights of fancy. The laws that the master-parakeet gives may be the laws of imagination, rather than those of reason. It is quite likely that Fuchs bases his interpretation of the poem on his reading of "Bantams in Pine-Wood" where Azcan clearly emerges as a grotesque figure, a ten-foot poet among the inchlings. But the parakeets here are not inchlings, though they are clearly moral. Nor is the master-parakeet a threatening, imposing figure (he neither speaks, nor sees). So, it is perhaps better, (better for want of any unanimous interpretatión) to take the master-parakeet as a symbol of imagination, the central imagination in a central man, as James Baird and many other commentators do.

EXPLANATION OF THE PASSAGES

Stanza 1

This opening tercet of Stevens' "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" provides the setting of whole poem and identifies the master-parakeet, the parakeet of parakeets, in a green tropical forest. It is in this forest that the parakeet as an abstraction, of the seed of life, sits among other parakeets and occupies a central position. This archetypal bird, or abstraction underlying all parakeets, is then described as the "pip" (the seed of life) whereas other parakeets are mortal ("mort" indicates death), tails (Synecdochically, the tail represents the parakeets). It is noteworthy that Stevens there establishes the contrast between the idea and the thing it represents: the master-parakeet is the archetypal idea, while the mortal parakeets are its embodiments in flesh.

Stanza 2

The second stanza then goes on with the description of the setting and the focus on the master-parakeet. This archetypal idea of the parakeet is surrounded by the "rudiments of the tropics", namely, the clear light of reason (that is, according to Stevens' symbolism); simultaneously, however, the greenery of the tropical forest suggests imagination (in Stevens' colour symbolism, "blue" represents imagination, while "green" represents the scope for imagination). There are ivory white aloe plants as well as the rust-coloured pears. The eyelids of the master-parakeet are white, thereby suggesting his blindness. In this setting, the master-parakeet is the possessor of life and therefore a permanent, pervasive presence among the mortal minor poets and imaginers. Though blind, the master-parakeet holds his away. The stanza is a litte ambiguous, especially in its reference to the blindness of the quint-

essential parakeet. Is the master-parakeet blind to whatever goes on around it and does it live in its own ivory tower, holding his silent and blind sway? Or does it suggest the blindness of all abstractions that the human mind manages to distill from concrete objects in the world?

Stanza 3

In this stanza, Stevens clarifies that the master-parakeet is not symbolic of any paradise beyond the earth; nor does it represent the unseen soul in the human body (in Stevens' hedonism, it needs to be noted, there is no scope for religious concepts). So, though the master-parakeet is bathed in the ethereal gold, he is not an idol. If at all he seems to be one, he is only a central figure on this earthly paradise. Though he does not and cannot see, he holds his sway over the surroundings as an ethereal "alguazil" (policeman). This stanza suggests that, for Stevens, the master-parakeet is symbolic of human imagination, which is both invisible and secular and yet quite pervasive.

Stanza 4

This stanza further emphasizes how the master-parakeet is different from tne mortal parakeets. "Panache upon panache" (plume upon plume), his tails and feathers spread upward and outward in green-vented forms (that is, though a central force, this symbol of imagination does not remain static because it causes imagination to be aroused in others). The master-parakeet remains unaffected in the midst of the changing seasons in the forest.

Stanza 5

This penultimate tercet describes the master-parakeet as an unmoved Mover ("unmoved Mover" is a religious term used for God). The colours of the master-parakeet's turbulent feathers seem to move and thereby indicate the existence of intellect, but still the bird does not himself move on his sharp, coppery claws. In other words, the master-parakeet is the potential cause of movement but remains unmoved himself; he is the law-giver, but himself remains above the laws he has made.

Stanza 6

In the last tercet the master-parakeet "muches a dry shell (the dry rind of a fruit) even as he exerts his will. Yet he never ceases to shine brightly in the sun-pallor of the rock. The rock, it is to be noted, is for Stevens a symbol of solid reality. The sun-pallor is sun-whiteness and it is related to the whiteness of the lids covering the eyes of the master-parakeet. The substance of the tercet is that the master-parakeet, a symbol of imagination on the solid reality of the earth is capable of causing imagination in poets and imaginers. The blind eyes of the master-parakeet do not stand in the

way of inspiring others; instead, they act as the reservoir of imagination for others to benefit from. As usual in Stevens, imagination in this case is grounded on reality: if the parakeet of parakeets symbolizes imagination, he is after all perched on a solid rock of reality.

10. PETER QUINCE AT THE CLEVIER

Introduction

"Peter Quince at the Clevier" is an early example of Stevens' craftsmanship as a poet. The poem is a beautiful masque in words and the "most splendid example of harmony and contrast." As William York Tindall remarks, "This imitation of symphonic form has four movements, each related to the others by theme and motif, each different from the others in rhythm and key. The first movement, quiet and meditative, is a thought-process, logical in frame, yet consisting of two analogies to be elaborated: that of music and that of Susanna and her red-eyed elders. Odd rhymes and 'pizzicati', interrupting sobriety at the end, promise another development". The second movement, revealing Susanna bathing in green water, is an andante. The third movement is introduced by a theatrical, masque-like intrusion of cymbal and horn. In this movement there is an incongruity created by means of elegant couplets having absurd rhymes, so that this curious mixture suggests the sound of the tambouriness and the vision of the "simpering Byzantines". The last movement brings the reader back to the first by the singer's meditations on body, death and beauty.

SUMMARY

Section 1

The first section consists of five unrhymed tercets in which sense flows from one to the other without much break. The beginning provides the setting: a musical composer, Peter Quince is playing upon his clavier, a stringed musical instrument, and thinking of music. The sounds produced by him are given a metaphysical or at least a symbolic dimension as they suggest the music of the spirit. Music is then compared to a feeling, analogically, and prepares the ground for the introduction of the second analogy: the blue-shadowed silk of a beauty, who is later transformed into Susanna. The rest of the poem then illustrates the idea by the momentary power of Susanna's beauty over the red-eyed elders. Beauty is like a strain of music, a strong sensuous, erotic feeling created in the elders by Susana's beauty, when she was bathing one evening in her silent arden and was watched by the red-eyed elders. The music of her beauty caused their heart-beats to increase and inspired a

sensuous, throbbing music within their bodies. The 'pizzicati' sounds of internal erotic vibrations made their pulse beat faster, and louder, as if the feelings were singing at their loudest.

Section 2

Section 2 presents a vivid picture of the nude Susanna bathing in her garden-pool. As she lay bathing, the sweet sensations inside her body made her feel a touch of spring and caused secret imaginings. She sighed for a melody consonant with her feeling. As she came out of the clear and warm water and stood on the bank, the cool she experienced was like that of spent emotions. In the leaves on the bank she felt the sensation of a devotional music. Then she walked on the grass, still trembling with cold. The winds, hesitating, acted as her maids and followed her on their timid feet. A breath, a whiff, of winds touched her hands and silenced the music of her feelings for a moment. But just then, it was followed by a boisterous, crashing music of a cymbal and a roaring horn.

Section 3

Immediately, with a loud sound like of the tambourines, her attendant Byzantine maids came and wondered why Susanna had cried against the elders by her side. As they whispered, the refrain of their song was like a willow tree swept by rain water. At once, they raised the wicks of their lamps and thereby unwittingly revealed Susanna in her nude beauty. Realizing what they had done, the foolish Byzantines ran away with noise of tambourines.

Section 4

The fourth and last section is not divided into any couplets or stanzas. The central argument comes back to the meditative beginning. The sight of the nude Susanna for a moment is the picture of beauty that lives long in the mind. It is like the momentary opening up of a portal which closes immediately, suggesting the edifice of beauty that remains only a matter of conjecture. But in the mortal mind, the concept of beauty is immortal. A body, even a beautiful body, perishes, but the beauty of the body lives in the mind. Evenings perish but their momentary charm leaves a trace of beauty in the mind, and there it continues to flow like an interminably flowing wave of water. The gardens wither away under the pressure of the winter. So maidens die, but their music of beauty remains behind to be sung. Susanna's music touched erotic veins of the white, red-eyed elders, but as she escaped (or disappeared) she left behind the ironical feeling of the death. This music having become immortal has now risen to the level of the sacramental. As Daniel Fuchs comments, "The particular body is part of the cycle of natural life, which includes the reality of physical beauty; just as one evening leads to the beauty of another, changing yet remaining the same; just as one wave, exhausting its brilliance, yields to the oncoming sameness of the sea".

CRITICAL COMMENTS

Structure

The poem is a fine example, structurally, of music and masque. Being a poem about music, its structure clearly evokes associations of music in accordance with the development of the theme. According to William York Tindall, the form of the poem is symphonic. Riddel, likewise, thinks that this poem develops musical analogy by varying a three-part sonatina framework including exposition, development, and recapitulation with coda. Accorning to this critic, the poem simultaneously operates on two levels: (1) as a parable that dramatizes the need for vital form in the experience of beauty and (2) as a statement of abstract theory which epitomizes all art forms in music. Wendall S. Johnson thinks that "Peter Quince at the Clavier" exemplifies the structure of a clavier sonata with four parts evolving as a fairly fast first and fourth movement establishing and then, respectively, summarizing a theme, changing to a second movement of slow deliberate progression to a climax in contrast to a third scherzo movement. In other words, the structure of the poem is in harmony with the musical theme.

James Baird, however, has suggested a masque-structure for this poem. According to him, "The woman-genius of the poet-musician, Peter the carpenter-performer, appears in blue-shadowed silk. The actors arrive: Susanna and the Elders, and the attendant Byzantines. The scene closes. Stevens speaks: Susanna is the theme, again and again; whoever of the long succession of artist-imaginers may have touched her, the beauty of her in his mind was monetary: yet in the countinuity of human imaginings she is immortal. This is the endurance of the human power to imagine beauty. It is deathless". The fact seems to be that Stevens has blended not only one but several arts in the structure of this poem: music clearly governs the movement from one section to another; there is a pictorial quality in the image of the nude Susanna bathing in the water-pool, then, there is the dramatic element in the appearance of the red eyed elders, the tambourline sounding "simpering Byzantines" and in the disappearance of Susanna; and finally, there is the abstract meditation of the poet-musician in the opening and the concluding sections. Commenting on this meaningful fusion of theme, meter, sound, rhythm and movement, Mary Joan Storm opines that the structure of the poem parallels a musical composition in which meaning, sound, and structure cohere inherently in the art form.

The Central Theme

No doubt, the poem is suggestive of music, but it is unfair to think of it as music and rhythm and little more. The basic theme underlying and controlling the whole poem is beauty, artistic or sensuous, as captured by imagination, and the momentariness of

this beauty. The concluding stanza aptly summarizes the theme by suggesting that the Susanna episode is an illustration of both the power and momentariness of beauty:

> The body dies; the body's beauty lives.
> So evenings die, in their green going,
> A wave, interminably flowing,
> So gardens die, their meek breath scenting
> The cowl of winter, done repenting.
> So maidens die, to the auroral
> Celebration of a maiden's choral.

The objects of imagination are fleeting, short-lived and mortal. But their power is captured by imagination and colours the objects that follow.

Ambiguity

The richness and complexity of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" have also created a little ambiguity. One of Stevens critics, Nasser, recognized the dramatic quality of its structure as well as the theme of imagination, but went on to say that Susanna is raped and murdered. The fact is that the whole illustration, highly musical as it is, carries its own charm and contrasts with the abstract theorizing about the momentary but powerful impact of imagination. Though most of the images are derived from music, "the red-eyed elders" whose presence causes Susanna to disappear may as well suggest the cold rational eye at the approach of which ethereal imagination, symbolized by Susanna, disappears, leaving its impact on the beholder.

Whatever the divergence of opinion about the central thematic concerns of this poem,. there is hardly any disagreement about its beauty and power.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. Just as my fingers on these keys
   Make music, so the selfsame sounds
   On my spirit make a music, too.

   Music is feeling, then, not sound;
   And thus it is that what I feel,
   Here in this room, desiring you,
   Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
   Is music.

Explanation—These opening lines of Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" provide a setting for the whole poem and strike it key-note. A composer Peter Quince is playing upon his clavier, a stringed musical instrument, and thinking of the idea of music. He finds a close relation between the external music created by him

through his clavier and the self-same sounds that come from his spirit. This leads the composer to argue that music is not a mere sound; it is rather a feeling. This makes the transition from the external music to the internal music of feeling rather smooth. The feeling analogically leads him to imagine the beauty of a blue-shadowed woman in silk and the thought is itself musical.

Stevens here tries to establish a relation between music as an external, artistic sound created by a musician and the internal music of human feeling, thought and imagination. The second, in turn, leads one to imagine the music beyond the immediate context. Beauty is itself analogically described as a kind of music.

2. In the green water, clear and warm,
Susanna lay.
She searched
The touch of springs,
And found
Concealed imaginings.
She sighed,
For so much melody.

Explanation—Having already established the relation between music and beauty, and between the blue-shadowed silk of a beauty and Susanna, Stevens in the second section of ' Peter Quince at the Clavier" provides a vivid anecdotal description of nude Susanna bathing comfortably in her garden pool. As she lay bathing in the pool, Susanna experienced pleasant, though strange, sensations inside her body. The touch of the deep spring filled her mind with imagination and she yearned for music. She sighed for a melody which was consistent with her feelings at that moment.

3. Soon, with a noise like tambourines,
Came her attendant Byzantines.
They wondered why Susanna cried
Against the elders by her side;
And as they whispered, the refrain
Was like a willow swept by rain.
Anon, their lamps' uplifted flame.
Revealed Susanna and her shame.
And then, the simpering Byzantines
Fled, with a noise like tambourines.

Explanation—These lines of the third section of Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" provide a fine blending of music, drama, and painting. As soon as the red-eyed elders (representing earthly and erotic reality) came near Susanna, the nude bathing in her pool in the preceding section, a cymbal crashed. Susanna's attendants, Byzantine maids, came running to her with a noise like that of the tambourines. They wondered why Susanna had cried

against the elders who lay by her side. As they whispered to each other, the refrain of their song was like the sound of a willow tree (representing fragility) swept by rain. Unable to decide what to do, the foolish maidens at once raised the wicks of their lamps and much to their horror, revealed Susanna in her complete nudity. Realizing what they had done, these foolish maids fled from the scene making a noise like that of the loud tambourines.

This section is a fine combination of rhythm, feeling, music and drama. The sound of the Byzantine maids is compared to the sound of the tambourines. The harsh noise is symbolic of the harsh reality; so is the foolish action of the maids in raising the wicks of their lamps. The rhythm of the poem works according to the dramatic emotion represented in this section.

4. Beauty is momentary in the mind—
The fitful tracing of a portal;
But in the flesh it is immortal.
The body dies; the body's beauty lives.
So evenings die, in their green going,
A wave, interminably flowing.

Explanation—These lines from the concluding section of Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" build the theory for which the Susanna story has acted as a concrete example in the preceding two sections. These lines return the reader to the beginning. The momentary sight of the nude beauty Susanna is like the opening of a portal which closes the edifice of beauty which, in turn, remains largely conjectural. But in the mortal mind, the concept of beauty is immortal. No doubt, a body, even a beautiful body perishes sooner or later, but the idea of and human fascination for beauty remain for ever. Evenings, likewise, perish but their momentary charm leaves their traces in the human mind where they continue to flow interminably The objects of imagination, like Susanna's beauty, are momentary and fleeting, but their charm remains for ever and is therefore immortal.

5. Susanna's music touched the bawdy springs
Of those white elders; but escaping,
Left only Death's ironic scraping.
Now, in its immortality, it plays
On the clear viol of her memory,
And makes a constant sacrament of praise.

Explanation—These concluding lines of Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" sum up his ideas on the power as well as transience of beauty and imagination. Susanna's nude beauty touched the erotic feelings of the red-eyed elders, but as she escaped from them she left behind for them the scraping of death. So maidens like Susanna also die one day or the other, but the power and impact

of their immortal beauty remains behind to be sung by poets and musicians. As Daniel Fuchs says, "The particular body is part of the cycle of natural life which includes the reality of physical beauty; just as one evening leads to the beauty of another, changing yet remaining the same; just as one wave, exhausting its brilliance, yields to the oncoming sameness of the sea." It is in this sense that a thing of beauty is a joy for ever; for its impact remains on the human mind.

11. THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD

Introduction

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is one of Wallace Stevens' early poems first published in the volume entitled *Harmonium*. Like many poems in this group, this poem about the blackbird also aroused a lot of controversy and brought accusations of dandyism, "fling" with language, and so on. Even Julian Simons, a perceptive critic of Stevens' poetry, tended to dismiss this poem along with many others for its lack of seriousness. Symons wrote, "A great many of the poems are written in the Imagist manner, with the sharpness and sensitiveness characteristic of the Imagist poets, but not with an Imagist seriousness; most of them contain a tittery joke, or if they do not contain a joke, they contain a titter, something which might have been a joke, the idea of a joke; and the joke is on Mr. Stevens as much as anyone". Interestingly, Symons cites the first three stanzas of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Blackbird" as an illustration of his thesis. Similarly Llewelyn Powys recognized this poem as "precocious" but also considered it impertinent." But as many subsequent critics have noted, this poem provides early hints of Stevens' poetic theory and his views on the problematic relation between the subject (the perceiving consciousness) and the object (the thing perceived). The central point of the poem, as Roy Harvey Pearce describes it, is that "there are after all, at least thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird". Carefully noted, these thirteen ways turn out to be thirteen phases of the imagination at play upon a winter landscape.

SUMMARY

The thirteen stanzas of varying length present at least thirteen pictures with the blackbird at the centre of each. The vision of the beholder changes because of the presence of the blackbird. The epigrams in each stanza, which Stevens preferred to call sensations, derive from the interaction of what we call reality and imagination. The bird is merely an occasion for these sensations, or a crowd of metaphors that Stevens creates in thirteen stanzas. At each level

the blackbird is involved in the mediation between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. As the bird and the perceived reality are both in a state of flux,—the bird, for example, sits, whistles, whirls and flies—the pictures keep on changing. Even an image visualized from a scene outside the immediate landscape is coloured by the thoughts of the blackbird.

In the first stanza, there are the images of twenty snowy mountains, a blackbird, and its moving eye. This is the starting point. In the second stanza, the division within the perceiver's own mind extends the single blackbird to three blackbirds on a tree. The whirling of the blackbird in the third stanza makes the perceiver aware of the pantomime of things, in a state of flux. As part of this shifting scenario, all reality now seems to be in a state of change and that is the uniting factor between a man, a woman, and a blackbird in stanza 4. The whistling of the blackbird sharpens the sense of sound in the perceiver and he wonders whether to choose "the beauty of inflection" or "the beauty of innuendoes". The sixth stanza takes the vision off the snowy landscape for a moment to a long window of barbaric glass but the shadow of the blackbird crosses this vision and the mind of the perceiver begins to trace an indecipherable cause in its shadow. The eye turns to Haddam men and women in stanza 7, and now the thin men of Haddam are advised not to imagine the golden bird but to focus on the blackbird that walks around the feet of the women about them. Stanza 8 recognizes that whatever the persona perceives is coloured by the presence of the blackbird. The momentary flight of the blackbird in the next stanza involves the perceiver in visualizing the edges of one of the many circles. As the blackbird flies in the green light, in stanza 10, it causes even the bawds of euphony to utter a sharp cry. Stanza 11 again takes the vision off the landscape, this time to the glass-coach and its rider in Connecticut; but the shadow of the blackbird lengthens on the coach and the rider is filled with fear. Then, in stanza 12, the movement of the river reminds the perceiver of the movement of the blackbird, while the concluding stanza, the winter landscape with the blackbird perched on a cedar figures once again, so that the afternoon atmosphere is coloured with the atmosphere of the evening. The blackbird is thus a constantly shifting arc of meaningful analogy between the speaker and some of the significant parts of the external words.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Blackbird" is no longer regarded as an exhibition of Stevens' dandyism but an important poem providing his ideas on the problematic relationship between the subject and the object on the one hand, and imagination and reality on the other. It also throws light or Stevens' theory of metaphor, analogy and resemblance.

The Relation Between the Subject and the Object

It is part of Stevens' view on reality that the consciousness of the perceiver interferes with a perception of the pure object. As a result, the object is seldom seen as it is, but mostly as what it appears to the consciousness of the perceiver, who brings with him his own ideas, feelings and notions of the thing. Secondly, perception is never from a fixed angle: Since reality is always in a state of flux, the perceiver's view of reality keeps on changing. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is used to illustrate this idea. The thirteen sections of the poem are swift passages of metamorphosis. As James Baird comments, "The eye turns with astonishing agility. Sight travels to the snowy mountains, to icicles along a window, to a 'glass coach' travelling along the Connecticut river in the vicinity of Haddam, to the cedar limbs as snow threatens again. The blackbird darts in and out of scene after scene. The light is green as he becomes more than one bird or wings in images of himself in the shadows of the 'coach'. All this darting motion of the imagination related to the jungle parakeet in a momentary blackbird, is of the poet's gleeful command: the unreal rising above the real. . . , It is a matter of seeing what is around one, and of projecting the imagination upon the immediate place where one lives." Beginning with the blackbird as the focal point Stevens develops the complicated process of observing reality and shows how difficult it is to perceive it. As Susan Weston has pointed out, "By the thirteenth stanza the bird has been successively involved in—or perhaps even permitted—knowledge of all kinds: of the limitations of the mind's perceptual abilities, the flux of reality and the temporality of the self, the necessity of living with that knowledge, and the right kind of aesthetic response to reality."

The Fabric of Metaphors

Secondly, the whole poem is not only a well-wrought fabric of concrete visual images, but also Stevens' comment on the function of metaphors. It is difficult to say what the blackbird symbolizes. Joseph N. Riddel thinks that it suggests "death-in-life," but the fact seems to be that Stevens' symbolism is not so static here; the bird means something different in different stanzas as it mixes with the changing object of vision. What is more important, however, is the light it throws on Stevens' view on metaphors. It is quite helpful to think of the blackbird as an occasion fot a crowd of metaphors which, according to Susan Weston, is the occasion it provides for "the linking together of 'blackbird' and a whole array of disparate things: the observer observes, and what he observes reminds him of a blackbird's possibilities—and of his own. The blackbird is a constantly shifting arc of meaningful analogy between the speaker and some of the significant parts of an exterior world." When Stevens says that "I was of three minds" he needs to illustrate the point by means of an analogy which comes in the form of "Like a tree/In which there are three blackbirds." Similarly, the

reference to the whirling motion of the blackbird is more than synecdoche of reality's change: it lets the perceiver feel the implicit threat to himself, for he too is liable to whirl to change. So, as Caldwell says, the interaction of reality and imagination in the poem is comparable to the interaction between two terms of a metaphor. Each stanza is a metaphor with two terms corresponding to imagination and reality, idea and thing, invisible and visible. This is why, concludes Caldwell"—"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" operates as an interaction of external and internal world viewed here as thirteen structured portraits of a bird, and it is also thirteen vignettes of imagination and reality mingling metaphorically.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. Among twenty snowy mountains,
   The only moving thing
   Was the Eye of the blackbird.

Explanation—These lines open Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and clearly provide a setting which acts as a background for the remaining twelve stanzas. There is an atmosphere of snow in the mountains. Everything is quiet and indoors. Only a blackbird sits amid the twenty snowy mountains and provides a focal point for the perceiver of the landscape. But this stanza itself acts as a poetic metaphor to describe the relation between both the mind of the perceiver and the object perceived. As the stanza deconstructs itself, one immediately notes the puns on both "I" and "moving." The "eye" of course refers to the blackbird, but it also, by way of pun, thinks of the "I," the perceiver. Similarly, "moving" does not only show the motion of the bird but also the way the perceiver is moved or affected by the presence of the blackbird on the scene. The stanza is thus a fine example not only of the problem of perception of reality, but also problematic relation between perception and description. It also shows how rhetoric sometimes complicates rather than clarifies meaning.

2. The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
   It was a small part of the pantomime.

Explanation—The third way of looking at an object as presented in Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" poses the question: how does one view reality from a fixed point of view when the reality is itself in a state of flux? The blackbird, which Stevens is using as a focal organizational point, started whirling, and as it whirled it made perception difficult. What is more, it reminded the perceiver of the pantomime of change that goes on in the larger world, a change of which the perceiver himself was a part. And as the perceiver thought of it, he was aware of

the threat to himself, the threat which change presents. The movement of the blackbird in this stanza is thus a means to suggest so many new images, thoughts and feelings which the consciousness of the perceiver brings to bear upon his simple perception of the whirling movement of a blackbird.

3. Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

Explanation—This stanza presents the sixth way of looking at the blackbird in Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Blackbird." The perspective provided in this section is not immediately related to the winter landscape which is the setting of the poem. The image comes of some one standing at the window. The position of the perceiver is static while the blackbird is dynamic. The shadow of the blackbird crosses to and fro and colours the vision of the perceiver whose mood changes. He begins to wonder about cause which he cannot easily decipher.

4. He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of the equipage
For blackbirds.

Explanation—This is the eleventh way in Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The perceiver this time is some "he" outside the immediate winter landscape. But as the poet-perceiver looks at the man in the glass-coach with the shadow of the blackbird falling behind the coach, he imagines the thoughts of the man in the coach. The journey suggests the passage of time and the shadow of the blackbird brings fears of death, which the blackbird seems to symbolize here. As Susan Weston comments on this section, "The magic fairyworld of Cindrella's glass coach is no cure for the blackbird's inescapable message of relatedness—to reality, process, and time. So the speaker of the poem contrasts himself in this stanza with the "he' of the glass coach, and in other stanzas with those who would escape observation of reality for some timeless and perfect world."

5. It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow,
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.

Explanation—This concluding stanza of the poem brings the reader as well as the poet-persona back to the initial setting: a snowy landscape in winter and a blackbird perched on cedar-limbs. By now there is an identification between the blackbird and the winter landscape, so much so that the afternoon seems to be the evening. It is an atmosphere of snow, the breaking of cedar limbs, and of utter blankness. The white landscape has now metaphorically become a black and white chiaroscuro. So, as Susan Weston comments on this stanza, "No longer an organizing point of contrast, the bird is now an omen of death. This is appropriately the last stanza in a poem about our life in reality. The poem could, of course, go on with an infinite number of momentary insights; Stevens stops on the deadly thirteenth only to show that the infinite variety of stances the mind can take as it perceives reality is circumscribed by time and therefore by death."

12. THE MAN WHOSE PHARYNX WAS BAD

Introduction

In "The Snow Man" Wallace Stevens emphasizes the need to have a mind of winter in order to perceive the wintry landscape so that no human projections interfere with the persona's confrontation with external reality. But sometime the unpleasant reality may be too much for a sensitive man, especially a poet, and it may strangulate his voice. This is precisely the situation in "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad". In the *Necessary Angel* Wallace Stevens himself explains this phrase thus: "the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation." The subject of the poem is thus the failure of imagination in the face of the pressure exercised by external reality. Yvor Winters somehow thought that the *ennui* expressed in the poem was the fate of all hedonists. It is not necessary, however, to associate this ennui with Wallace Stevens himself; rather it is the ennui that can be the fate of any man of imagination in the face of a tedious, quotidian reality.

Originally, it needs to be noted, "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" consisted of five stanzas. But when it was included in *Harmonium*, it went through some revisions and excluded one stanza. As Yvor Winters has restored the original version the stanza missing from *Harmonium* and the *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* reads as follows:

> The malady of the quotidian . . . .
> Perhaps if summer ever came to rest
> And lingthened, deepened, comforted, caressed
> Through days like oceans in obsidian.

In fact what Stevens did, while including this poem in *Harmonium*, is that he combined this stanza (originally stanza 3) with stanza 4 in the original version: The fourth stanza in the periodical publication reads like this:

> Horizons, full of night's midsummer blaze;
> Perhaps, if winter once could penetrate
> Through all its purples to the final slate,
> Persisting bleakly in an icy haze.

This is why the third stanza in *Collected Poems* is as follows:

> The malady of the quotidian . . .
> Perhaps, is winter once could penetrate
> Through all its purples to the final slate,
> Persisting bleakly in an icy haze.

The summary and the critical commentary in this section of the book are based on the original version of the poem, though both take into account the revisions made by Stevens.

SUMMARY

Stanza 1

At the beginning the poet-persona laments how time has become so indifferent that neither summer ("the mildew of summer") nor the winter, with its "deepening snow" makes any difference. Instead, both seem to have become a recurring routine. Oppressed by the pressure of this routine-like reality, the poet-persona suffers from feelings of claustrophobia ("my being pent") and finds himself mute. He can no longer exercise his imagination to re-create the reality which is too oppressive to allow him to contemplate on it.

Stanza 2

Continuing the description of the unwholesome reality, the poet-persona says that the wind blowing in the summer month of June or the cold wind blowing in the month of December seems to make no difference. Each strikes against the closed shutters of houses in the cities and stirs no inspiration in the poets who continue to sleep. The wind thus tolls (acts as a knell) the grand ideas even at the moment of their apprehension. As a result, these ideas and flights of imagination in normal times remain unexpressed.

Stanzas 3 and 4

· The whole situation presents the "malady of auotidian": an oppressive reality becoming a disease of the mind. There might be some change, however, if the summer came to rest and lengthened, deepened and comforted all the horizons during the days and provided a midsummer warmth during the nights. Or, conversely;

things might change if the winter not only lengthened but broke through the oppressive purple (a symbol of too heavy reality) and penetrated to the quintessence of things, by persisting bleakly in an icy haze.

Stanza 5 (4 in the revised version)

If that could happen (if either summer deepened and lengthened, or winter revealed the quintessential reality underlying the slate), there might be some hope and the man with the bad pharynx (the poet-persona) might become less diffident. He might, then, pick up a design from the summer mildew (literally, the growth of fungi forming on plants) or spout (like the branching of a tree), a new voice from the cold winter. But as things stand, one can only hope, and still persist in hoping. Unfortunately, however, time is relentless and will not wait.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The Central Theme

The central theme of "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" is the *ennui* caused in a man of imagination by the quotidian reality of a dull and tedious daily routine. Such a malady is not the privilege or bane of a hedonist but, as Marius Bewley remarks, a "characteristically human state that occurs at intervals in the best-regulated lives—and in spiritual writers its occurrence, or the occurrence of something very like it in a vastly aggravated form, is usually regarded as one of the more unpleasant symptoms of interior progress." It is the kind of dejection that Coleridge experiences in his "Dejection Ode". But there is a basic difference in the handling of the same, or nearly the same experience even though the subject is the failure of imagination. As Daniel Fuchs describes this difference, "Colerdige can write in majestic terms, indeed write even an exalted ode about his condition, Stevens must self-ironically call his condition by a name that will elicit the sympathy of those around him. Where Coleridge can use the intimacy of first confession, Stevens must mute his complaint by referring to himself in the anonymous third person, as the man whose pharynx was bad." But it is futitle to associate the states described in these two poems with the writers. Bewley does have a strong point in suggesting that the condition both the poets embody in their poems is pretty general. What is more, Stevens does not remain entirely discouraged for he is trying to master the failure reality with the help of imagination. Paradoxically, the sterility or of imagination that Stevens laments is very much present in the poem. This is evident from the care Stevens has paid to its design and imagery,

Structure and Imagery

Much of the appeal of "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" derives not from the feeling of loss embodied in it, but the way this loss has been expressed. In five stanzas of verse (four in the revised version finally included), Stevens has carefully drawn a contrast between summer and winter. The conflict is negatively resolved in that both fail to inspire the imagination in the poet-persona. The images of "mildew" in summer and of wind striking against the shutters of the metropolis in winter, the knell that this wind sounds, and the symbol of purple for the oppressive reality beautifully express the factors responsible for the failure of imagination. "Obsidian horizons" are particularly evocative; for, as Bewley observes, "Obsidian is volcanic glass, and therefore suggests the fiery fusing power of the imagination in the Coleridgean sense. The symbolism of summer and winter, which is Stevens' private symbolism, is used equally effectively. For snowy winter is the time when things are seen clearly and without false illusion (as, for example, in "The Snow Man)"; summer suggests the time when imagination and reality achieve a synthesis. The tone of the whole poem is controlled by an oppressive purple.

The poem thus provides a variation on the theme of imagination *versus* reality. If imagination must impose an order on reality as it does in "The Idea of Order at Key West," if imagination (or anything in the consciousness) must not interfere with reality (this is the subject of "The Snow Man"), it is quite likely that sometime bare reality of a quotidian nature may be too much for an imaginative man or artist (the man whose pharynx was bad) to bear.

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Stanza 1

Unlike many of Stevens' poems which celebrate the power of imagination and its capacity to order reality, "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" deals with the failure of imagination when the climate is hostile to any acts of creativity. The opening stanza describes how the perceiver looks at the summer and winter and the change of seasons in nature but remains unaffected by them. For both of these have become a matter of dull routine, a quotidian thing. This creates a feeling of claustrophobia and the man of imagination finds himself irrelevant and helpless. He can no longer exercise his imagination to recreate the reality that he sees around himself. The reality is in fact rather oppressive and does not at all allow any free-play to the imagination in this particular instant.

Stanza 2

This second stanza of "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" continues the description of the dull and otherwise oppressive

reality. The poet-persona now says that the wind blowing in the summer months of June or the cold wind blowing in the month of December seems to make no difference for him. Each in its time strikes against the closed shutters of houses in the cities but fails to inspire the poets, who, indifferent to the change of seasons, remain sleeping inside their metropolitan houses. In such a situation, the wind acts as a knell of all ideas in the village as soon as they arise. As a result, these ideas and the flights of imagination remain unexpressed in any artistic form because of the failure of imagination.

Stanzas 3 and 4

The two concluding stanzas of "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" describe the impact of the quotidian reality on the mind of the poet-persona. The malady of the quotidian has by now become a disease of the mind, affecting all creative thoughts. There might perhaps be some change if the winter could lengthen and break through the oppressive purple (a symbol of harsh reality) and penetrate to the quintessence of things by persisting bleakly in an icy haze. Or, conversely, if the summer lengthened and comforted all the horizons during the days and provided a midsummer warmth during the nights, things might change; one might become less diffident and engage in works of creative imagination. But as things remain, one can only hope and hope. Time, however, will not relent and keep on passing as it does. The poem thus closes on a note of hope mixed with doubt.

13. THE DEATH OF A SOLDIER

Introduction

Like the "Emperor of Ice-Cream," "The Death of a Soldier" also takes up the subject of death. As usual with Stevens, he presents death as a fact of life, its very culmination, and therefore resists the general tendency to sentimentalize about it. "The Death of a Soldier" is a remarkable example of this emphasis on the acceptance of death. The concrete example chosen this time is the death of a soldier, an event which in some other poets could inspire either a patriotic rhapsody or a sentimental portrait.

SUMMARY

Stanza 1

The poem consists, of four short stanzas of three lines each. The first stanza makes a general statement about the acceptance of death as the inevitable culmination of life. As life contracts within a man, death is the expected finality, much in the same manner that as the fruits on the trees ripen in autumn, they fall down. This happens with the soldier too as the precise moment arrives.

Stanza 2

The dead soldier does not, by the fact of his death, become an important or celebrated personage whose death will fill the headlines of newspapers and call for a three-day long funeral ceremonies. The allusion here is to the death of a great personage which causes a kind of shock wave and is remembered through state funerals for a few days. The three-day pomp may as well refer to Christ's death.

Stanzas 3 and 4

The next stanza then builds on the idea that death does not call for any pomp: for it is absolute and without a memorial. This statement is followed by the notation of a natural phenomenon. When in the season of autumn death strikes a ripe fruit or a man, one wind, that of the human breath, stops, but the wind in nature goes on. This is clear from the indifferent movement of the clouds in the sky:

> When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
> The clouds go, nevertheless,
> In their direction.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem is an early example of Stevens' ambiguity as well as the use of his imagery. As for the ambiguity, it occurs largely from the blending of the natural with the human, but with the difference that no pathetic fallacy is involved. The soldier dies, as ripe fruits fall in the season of autumn. One wind, an individual life stops, but the other wind, the natural wind in the sky, remains indifferent to this fact. At first, it is difficult to make the connection, because a simple paraphrase leads nowhere. But when the two are seen together, an abstract—"Death is absolute and without memorial" or "Life contracts and death is expected"—gains in significance by a combination with the concrete instances. Commenting on this aspect of the poem, R. P. Blackmur writes, "As in the body sensations are definite but momentary, while feelings are ambiguous (with reference to sensations) but lasting; so in this poem the words are definite but instant, while the feelings they raise are ambiguous (with reference to the words) and have importance. Used in this way, words, like sensations, are blind facts which put together produce a feeling no part of which was in the data."

This is a familiar enough technique in Wallace Stevens. The second aspect is Stevens' attitude towards death, an attitude which is rather unconventional. As Stevens emphasizes an unsentimental attitude toward death in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," he even indulges in a little bit of irreverence in "The Death of a Soldier."

The allusion to a "three-days personage," as Daniel Fuchs remarks, "is an allusion to the myth of Christ. The soidier's death is seen as nothing special, but part of life as we know it. It is therefore oapable of moving us." As a result of this attitude we begin to see death as something we know, as part of the rhythm of natural life. Eternal and ephemeral as the clouds, human life goes on.

Apart from the mocking images of the "pomp" there is the central image of the wind which shows Stevens' attitude towards death. This single image is given the effect of a pun, when once it is used for breath and then as a literal word for a natural wind. But this image, especially in its indifference to the death of a soldier (or of any human being, for that matter) also assumes a little poignancy:

> When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
> The clouds go, nevertheless,
> In their direction.

That human death is not an earth-shaking event for the forces of nature is a fact, but also a poignant fact. Simultaneously, it also deflates all human claims of grandeur and significance. Thus Stevens succeeds in achieving so much complexity in a small poem of twelve lines.

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Stanza 1

The opening stanza of "The Death of a Soldier" provides a gist of the idea which the rest of the poem develops. Death is the culmination, the final goal of life. As life draws towards its conclusion, death is inevitable and final, much in the same way as one season must yield to another. This is also true of a soldier who falls simply because, like a fruit in autumn, he dies when the time comes.

The opening stanza thus presents, without any sentimentalizing, Stevens' ideas about death, which is the final goal of life. Death like everything else in the world is indicative of change, and so there is, according to Stevens, nothing unusual about it.

Stanza 2

The fallen soldier does not become a personage whose funeral news and notices will appear in the newspapers and whose last rites will call for a pompous procession of mourners. The implicit reference here is to the death of Christ and the three-day pomp till his resurrection. The poem thus subversively, in this stanza, establishes that death is final and there is no resurrection, or afterlife.

Stanzas 3 and 4

The third stanza again picks up the thread of the argument introduced in the first stanzna: Death is absolute and without a memorial. It comes more or less in the same manner that a wind suddenly stops in the season of autumn and the ripe fruits fall. The individual wind, the breath of a man, likewise ends, but life goes on. Death is part of life and therefore no earth-shaking event; for the clouds in the sky go on in their direction irrespective of what happens below.

It needs to be emphasized, however, that the poem simply defies paraphrasing and summarizing: it is its own reason for being what it is. The different parts of the poem, its stanzas, lines, rhythms, and words, together make a meaning which none of them can separately suggest. Loius Mac Niece once said that a "poem need not mean but be". "The Death of Soldier" is such a poem in which the poem itself is the meaning and the form is quite inseparable from the paraphrasable content.

14. THE IDEA OF ORDER AT KEY WEST

Introduction

"The Idea of Order at Key West" (1936) once again explores the relation between art and nature, this time between music of a young girl and the vast sea (in the "Anecdote of the Jar," the interaction explored was that between art and nature). Simultaneously, it takes up the question which frequently figures in Stevens' poetry: Is order a part of nature or reality, or is it a human imposition on the world of reality? The setting of the poem is the sea-side at Key West where the poet (or persona) and his friend, identified as Ramon Fernandez, listen to the song of the girl at the time of evening, a song which by the power of its music, enhances the music of the sea, compels them to think of the relation between the human "she" and the vast roaring "sea." Ramon Fernandez of this poem is not the French literary critic but as Stevens says, "I used two everyday names. As I might have expected, they turned out to be an actual name."

SUMMARY

Stanza 1

The opening stanza, as usual in many Stevens' poems, provides the setting and the expository information. A girl is seen singing by the side of the sea at Key West. Stevens emphasizes first the separateness of the two from each other: the woman singer is not a symbol for the music of the sea but an actual person creating music by the seaside. The sounds of the human song and the roar of the sea appear as two distinct sounds. Yet, there was also a mingling of the two sounds; for the sea's "mimic motion/Made

constant cry, caused constantly a cry." That it was not a human voice but that of the sea is made clear by the last line of the opening stanza:

> That was not ours although we understood,
> In human, of the veritable ocean.

Stanza 2

The second brief stanza further emphasizes the separateness of the singer from the sea: "The sea was not a mask. No more was she." Nor were the two musical sounds a medleyed (mixed) sound, even though what she sang was echoed by the sea, "word by word." But although her phrases seemed to stir the grinding waters of the sea, as well as the gasping wind, there was no doubt that the song was hers and not the sea's.

Stanza 3

The next stanza, stanza 3, begins by emphasizing the separateness between the two melodies, the melody of the girl's song, and that of the sea's sound. She "was the maker of the song she sang," while the "ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea" was no more than a setting for her song. But soon the second half of this stanza raises the question: "Whose spirit is this? For the poet-persona and his friends want to explore the quintessential music found in the voice of the girl in its sea-side setting. This question naturally leads to the quest for the interaction between the two.

Stanza 4

The next stanza, stanza 4, begins rather tentatively with its "ifs" and "ors." If it were only the dark voice of the sea that rose or even if it were the voice of the sea mingled with the sound of the rising waves; if it were only the external sound of the sky, of clouds, or of the striking of the waves against the shore; it would at best have been a sound of the deep air, repeated in a summer but no more than that. But the sound they (the poet-persona and his friend Ramon Fernandez) heard was more than that sound. It was also more than the song of the girl who was singing by the sea-shore. Not only this, the sound they heard was much more than the voice of the sea, the sound of the girl's song, their own voices, and the mixed sound of water and wind, all put together. The song in its setting had thus become something much more than both itself and the setting of sea, waves, clouds, and winds.

Stanza 5

Stanza 5 focuses the attention on the girl and her song once again, independently of her setting. It was the voice of the girl that made the sky appear acute even as the song vanished. As she measured her hour of solitude by singing by the seaside, the music of the girl imposed an order on her surroundings:

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.

Her song has thus becomes the uniting link between herself and the sea so that neither is a stranger to the other. What is more, she has got an insight into the complex structure of life. And "the girl's harmony with her surroundings," remarks Kessler, "brings the speaker of the poem to an awareness and knowledge."

Stanza 6

How much the poet and his friend were influenced by this fusion of the girl's song with her setting is the subject of stanza 6. The poet-persona asks his friends how changed they felt when the girl's song ended and they turned toward the town. Their experience of the perceived harmony between the girl and the sea made them look differently toward things which would have been for them rather ordinary without this experience. The glassy lights of the city, the lights in the fishing boats at anchor appeared quite different when the night fell. An order had been imposed on everything in the setting, the night appeared to be controlled; the sea adequately and artistically portioned out, "emblazoned zones and fiery" poles, all had found a point of reference and consequently assumed a definite shape and design.

Stanza 7

The poem then concludes with the human need for order, this "blessed rage," the maker's rage to order words of the sea," and everything around. Order is, thus, a man-made thing, and also a basic human need. As David Daiches sums up this concluding stanza, the point of the poem becomes clearer: "Art is man's creation, and gives meaning to nature, which is not man's creation but something that he finds around him."

CRITICAL COMMENTS

The Central Theme

The central theme of this poem, as well as that of "Anecdote of the Jar" is the baffling relation between Art and Nature. In "Anecdote of the Jar," the object of art is the bare and barren jar which imposes order on the "slovenly wilderness" of Tennessee; here in this poem it is the enchanting music of the solitary singer by the seaside which changes the whole atmosphere so much so indeed that there appears to be a perfect harmony between the singer and the sea. The sound of the sea, of the sky, and of the wind, are all in human sounds, but as the song of the girl imposes

order on all of these, their original sound seems to undergo a change. The action, however, is not merely one-sided; the girl's song also gains in richness as it is accompanied by the music of the sea. The interaction between the two produces a music far richer than either. Taking music as a shorthand term for art, Stevens seems to say that the voice of poetry, or imagination, orders the chaos and gives a hitherto unperceived intensity to experience. The imaginative order of poetry in Stevens, according to Daniel Fuchs, "is one which yields meaning and beauty; it is that violence from within that protects us from the violence without. . . .The peculiar magic of the imagination is that, through it, life's dimensions become more specific while becoming more mysterious."

The poem is thus a remarkable step in the overall thematic framework of Stevens' poetry. Also, it is an important part of Stevens' theory of literature which, as Dennis Walland, elaborates it, "cannot reproduce the simultaneity of our apprehension of and response to the sea in actuality, nor should it wish to. Its strength lies rather in its power for order, its ability, by what Coleridge called the shaping spirit of imagination, to make us understand more fully the significance that the sea has for us. The point is a familiar one, but it is made in a memorable way in this poem because of the perfect harmony between meditative toughness. . . . and beauty of rhetoric. . . ."

It needs to be emphasized, however, that the poem is explorative rather than assertive. If one examines the construction of the poem, especially its use of the conditional if-clauses, imaginary past tense, and questions which act not as interrogations but a qualified assertions, the nature of the order imposed by art on Nature or external reality appears somewhat tentative rather than final. In this respect, the poem perhaps reveals Stevens' paradoxical position as a poet-thinker who questions old beliefs rather forcefully but recognizes the limits of all fictions, including his own, and therefore makes tentative suggestions about the nature of human or artistic order that is imposed on reality.

Description of and Attitude Towards Nature

"The Idea of Order at Key West" shows Stevens' typical attitude toward nature, an attitude which simultaneously compares and contrasts him from the romantic Wordsworth and the Adamic Whitman. Insofar as the description by itself is concerned, it echoes Wordsworth, but whereas Wordsworth finds an immanent order in Nature, an order, which according to him is always benign and spiritual, Stevens thinks that this order is after all a human imposition. In this second respect, his attitude towards Nature is more like Coleridge's, for Coleridge also thought that Nature appears to us as we think of her. Stevens goes one step further in this poem and argues that the interaction between the subject (the human perceiver) and the object (that is, the object of perception)

creates a new order, which is richer than both. The girl's song enriched and was, in turn, enriched by the song of the sea. Taken separately, the two would appear quite different. As for the comparison with Whitman, the remarks of Joseph Riddel are worth quoting: "Stevens makes no claims, philosophically or aesthetically to the sense of cosmic oneness with nature and the universe that informs Whitman's ecstatic flights." The world we sing and make remains momentary and provisional, yet ever-renewable in the ritual of living 'as and where we live'."

Artistry

Apart from Stevens' glorification of the human order imposed by imagination on the physical, natural reality, the poem is a remarkable example of Stevens' poetic craftsmanship. The central theme is developed systematically through seven stanzas of varying length, depending on the emotional thrust of the argument. First of all, in the opening three stanzas, Stevens carefully emphasizes the separateness of the human singer from the sea. Then in two stanzas stanzas four and five, he presents a fusion of the two, emphasizing how the order imposed by imagination has become one with the music of the natural scene and sound. The penultimate stanza shows the impact of this interaction on the whole scene, including the human perceivers and listeners, the poet-persona and his friend Ramon Fernandez. The concluding stanza then sums up the poet's attitude towards the order. The interaction thus brings about a synthesis between nature and art, which the girl's song has imposed no matter how temporarily.

The images of "sea," "girl", "water," "song," "wind," "air," "sky," "cloud," and "voices," are integrated and made indistinguishable from each other by a sequence of conditional clauses beginning with "even if. . .," "since. . .," "it may be. . . ." "if. . .," and "or. . ." Incidentally, Stevens' images of the sea as "inhuman," "the grinding water," "ever-hooded," "meaningless plungings," "bronze shadows heaped on high horizons," and "dimly-starred" firmly place him in the tradition of American poets such as Frost, Whitman and Longfellow, even as they emphasize the change in Stevens' own attitude towards the sea.

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Stanza 1

The opening stanza of "The Idea of Order at Key West" provides the setting for the ideas of order that Stevens affirms in this poem. A solitary girl is seen singing by the side of the port in Key West. Stevens first emphasizes the separate identities of the female singer and the sea: the singer is not a symbol for the music of the sea, but a literal, human singer creating music by the sea. As the water of the sea rises and falls it produces an incoherent, shapeless music of its own, but the sea's formless music is clearly different

from the girl's. And yet there was a process of inter-mingling despite the separate kinds of the two songs. The music of the sea both imitated (or so it seemed) and caused the girl's song, though the sea's music was inhuman, incoherent and shapeless. This expository information in the opening stanza prepares the reader for the fusion of the two voices in subsequent stanzas and Stevens' insistance that order is imposed on nature by man and not vice-versa.

Stanza 2

The second stanza further emphasizes the literal nature of the sea as well as the girl. The sea was not a symbol for anything, but a literal fact. So was the human singer by its side. Similarly, there was a clear distinction between the human music and the sound of the sea, even though what the human singer sang was echoed almost word for word by the sea. It is quite possible, Stevens affirms, that the human song stirred the grinding waters of the sea as well as the gasping wind, yet neither could be mistaken for the other: both had separate identities. The song that the poet and his friend heard was the song of this human singer and the song of the sea, if it could be called a song at all.

Stanza 3

This stanza, the third, still maintains the distinctness of the girl's song from the sea's loud noise. It was the girl who created her song, independently of what the sea did. The sea, with all the traditional associations of its tragic gestures was nothing but only a place by the side of which the human singer sang her song. But now this stanza introduces the question of the inter-relation of the two songs: Whose spirit is this? For the poet and his friend are eager to find out an answer to this question. The continuous, unbroken song of the girl reinforced the question in the mind of the two listeners and thereby provided a peg for the poet to hang his theory of order on it.

Stanza 4

The fourth stanza tries to explore an answer to the question already raised in stanza 3: Whose spirit was this? Tentatively, with "ifs" and "ors" the poet faces this question and suggests some interrelated answers. If it were only the dark voice of the sea that rose, or even if it were the voice of the sea mixed with the sound of the rising waves, if it were only the external sound in the atmosphere, the sky and the wind, or if it were only the sound of the waves rising and striking against the sea-shore, it could at best have been a sound of the sea in summer repeated endlessy by the sea-shore. But the poet now recognizes that the sound they (he and his friend Ramon Fernandez) heard was not simply this. It was more than the song of the girl and it was clearly more than the sound of the sea alone, more than the sound of the spectators' own voices. And it was more than the combination of all three: the song of the girl, the sound of the sea, and the sound that the talk of

the poet and his friend made at this moment. It did not simply seem to be the sound of the movement by the sea-side, or of the commotion within it with the rising of mountainous waves and their meaningless plungings. The point of the stanza is that the girl's music by the seaside had not only imposed an order on the sound of the sea at night, but also created a new order of music which was much more than all the sounds by the seaside put together. And it was also different.

Stanza 5

This stanza, stanza 5, focuses on the song of the girl alone and regards it as the creator of the order on the meaningless sounds of the sea. It was the voice of the girl that made the sky appear sharp and acute even as the song vanished. As she passed her solitude by the seaside in singing, her music imposed an order on her surroundings, much in the same way that the bare and barren jar in "Anecdote of the Jar" imposes an order on the slovenly wildernesses of Tennessee. The girl's song, seen thus, has become a ink between herself and the sea. Not only this, the fusion is so complete that one song cannot be separated from the other. The sea too had merged its own identity in the girl's and become inseparable for the moment. The poet and his friend Ramon Fernandez realized that for this girl there was no other world except the one she had created by her song. The identification between the subject (the perceiver) and the object (the thing perceived) had become one, and in the process something new had emerged. This was the order that the girl's song had imposed on her surroundings.

Stanza 6

The world thus created did not exist for the human singer alone; the poet as well as his friend Ramon Fernandez also experienced the creation of this new order: For as soon as the song ended and the poet and his friend turned back toward the city, everything in the surroundings seemed to them to have been tronsformed. Their experience of the harmony between the human singer and the inhuman sea, which they had together perceived, had made them look differently toward the seascape. The glassy lights of the city, the lights in the fishing boats now lying at anchor appeared quite different when the night fell. The girl's song had not only mastered the world around and portioned it out for the viewers as well, but it had also transformed everything around by imposing a new order on it. Everything had now found a point of reference and therefore assumed a different shape and design, much in the same manner that the slovenly wildernesses of Tennessee acquire a definite shape once the jar is placed on the hill.

Stanza 7

The concluding stanza provides a coda to this highly musical poem about the effect of music. Human beings have a great longing for order, an order which is not to be found in the external world but exists within them. If the poet and his friend tried to decode the meaningless plungings of the sea in the light of the music of the girl, it was chiefly because of their "rage for order." In the words of David Daiches, "Art is man's creation, and gives meaning of nature, which is not man's creation but something that he finds around him." Art is thus a means of imposing order on the chaotic reality of the world. Thus the last stanza implicitly challenges the existence of any external order than the one which human beings impose on external reality. It shows both the lack of order in the world and the human necessity for imposing an order on it. The poem is not only an argument for order, but also a specimen of it.

15. A POSTCARD FROM THE VOLCANO

Introduction

Wallace Stevens was highly fascinated and impressed by modern painting, especially impressionist and cubist. The latter appealed to him even more because it suited his own theory of imagination, according to which an object was a blending of what it was in itself and the imagination that the perceiver brought to bear upon it. In this respect the approach of modern painting and poetry, in Stevens' opinion was the same. As Michael Benamou puts it, "The merit- of the poem or picture arises from the degree of concentration with which the imagination refracts the object." In "The Idea of Order at Key West," it is the singer's music which imposes a new order on the reality around her, an order which is perceptible to the poet-persona and his friend Ramon Fernandez. But it does not apply to high-quality music or beautiful landscape. According to Benamou, "The meanest and most derelict thing can thus be made significant, beautiful." Stevens' short poem "A Postcard from the Volcano" fully exemplifies this idea.

SUMMARY

"A Postcard from the Volcano" consists of eight stanzas of three lines each, with sense flowing freely from one to the other. The picture presented is that of the ruin caused by an imaginary volcano on the present landscape. The poet-persona conjectures how the people in the future will respond to the heap of ruins. Simultaneously, he makes it clear that the present with its ruins will also carry its artistic vision to the future, so that what the observer will see in the ruined landscape will be his own perception combined with the traces of the present perception.

When children pick up our bones in some distant future, they will not perhaps realize that these bones were at one time living bodies, as quick as the foxes on the hill. They will find it difficult to believe that we also had our feelings and sensations. For example, when a wind blew over the grapes in autumn, we experienced their smell and were thrilled, and that we also breathed the autumn frost. (That is, we too were aware of the change of seasons and the changes they brought about in our response to them).

What is more, these young observers in the distant future will not be able to guess correctly that when we died, we did not leave behind only our bones ; in fact we left much more than those. And what we left is part of their present. What we left behind still conditions the appearance of the things they see. We left behind our feelings which became a part of the landscape, the reality they will experience. What we saw coloured the landscape and added a new dimension to it. If the closed mansion beyond our gate and the windy sky utters a literate, desperate cry, it speaks of the anguish we felt. And what we said of our situation, the landscape and the overall reality surrounding us became a part of them. This part remains and will remain for the future observes to see. So when children still weaving their own fabrics of imagination will look at the ruins they will unconsciously speak our language without knowing it.

Looking at the shuttered mansion they will say that it seems as if the person who lived there left behind a spirit which pervades the mansion, a spirit which still storms the blank walls. They will then find that the dirty house with all its tatters of ruins is coloured with the gold of the opulent sun, a gold that, in the words of Michell Benamou, "performs the same imaginative function as the chrome yellow enhancing the dried up fishes painted by George Braque. Everything will then undergo a metamorphosis, and the picture that will appear will combine in itself the landscape, the perception of the past people and the imagination that the future generations will bring to bear upon the landscape.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The poem, as pointed out earlier, is a fine example of Cubist painting in verse, because what it seeks to describe is not the reality as observed by perceiver, but the reality simultaneously coloured by an intermingling of different visions : the landscape, the landscape as seen and experienced by the past observers, and as seen and experienced by the future observers. In the process, new structures emerge out of those very structures which were created by the past. As James Baird comments on this aspect of the poem "No 'radiance' of dead blaze" is left on the poet's building. Yet

what is left will survive for a little time as he perishes, an ember among the cinders of entombment. This image of the ember is of the highest significance in any examination of Stevens' poetics. It urges the vitality of poetry lived by its creator, the process of poetry. Poetry is immediate; it is flourishing in private vision, his 'own.' Abandoned at death by the individual imagination that shaped it, the achievement yet knows an endurance. But it is to be endurance among the cinders, the past to which every present moves, cinders of that landscape projected by the poet in "A Postcard from the Volcano."

There is a close interaction between past and present, a thing and what is said or imagined about it. The main idea of "A Postcard from Volcano" is this: what is said about a mansion becomes a part of it." The poem thus exhibits Stevens' theory of imagination, this time from a pictorial perspective.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. The spring clouds blow
Above the shuttered mansion-house,
Beyond our gate and the windy sky
Cries out a literate despair.
We knew for long the mansion's look
And what we said of it become
A part of what it is . . .

Explanation—These lines, taken from Stevens' "A Postcard from the Volcano" emphasize the relation between the perceiver and the world on the one hand, and between past and present on the other. Children looking at a shuttered mansion house in the distant future will look at it and utter a cry of despair and desolation because of its ruined state. But it will also reveal to the beholders in the future the spirit of the people who lived in it at one time. For the house will be not just a ruined mansion house but also have in it a part of the past dwellers, and of their spirit. Then the beholders will realize that a building is not just it self but also part of the past dwellers and their ideas about it, For, according to Stevens, an object is what it seems to the beholder.

2. . . . Children . . .
Will speak our speech and never know

Will say of the mansion that it seems
As if he that lived there left behind
A spirit storming in blank walls,

A dirty house in a gutted world,
A tatter of shadows peaked to white,
Smeared with the gold of the opulent sun.

Explanation—When the children in the future will look at the mansion house with its shuttered doors, the house will speak to them about the nature and spirit of the people who once lived in it. They will realize how the spirit of the past still pervades it. It will seem to strike at its blank walls. The ruined, tattered and dirty house will no longer remain for them what it is; instead, it will be coloured with the gold of the opulent sun, the gold of future imagination. So what the children in the future will see in the house will be a fusion of the actual ruined house, the spirit of the past dwellers, and the beholders' own imagination. In addition as James Bairds emphasizes, the lines suggest that "abandoned at death by the individual imgination that shaped it, the achievement yet knows an endurance. But it is to be endurance among the cinders, the past to which every present moves."

16. PAROCHIAL THEMES

Introduction

"Parochial Themes" is the first poem in Stevens' *Parts of a World*. The title of the collection is appropriate because here in this collection Stevens deals with parts rather than the ideas of order. "Parochial Themes" appropriately announces this collection by including the word "parochial," to suggest the diversity in the collection. But in one sense the title "parochial" is misleading because Stevens is still concerned with the idea of shaping the world anew, not through politics, philosophy or religion, but through a fresh oppression of reality in this life and in this world.

SUMMARY

The poem begins by describing a natural setting in pine-lands where "Parisian" hunters on their ponies are busy shooting on the hill. The wind blows and in the wind one hears musical shapes blown by an anonymous blower, blowing at the thinnest *mi* of a pitched human cry. There is life here. The hunters move to and fro. The whole surrounding, the trees, the grunting and shuffling sounds of branches of the old, nocturnal and blue green pines deepen the feelings to the level of inhuman depths. That no symbolism intended is made clear by the statement : "These are the forests." The health in the forests is holy, with all this "halloo, halloo" going on there. This sound dominates the sound and cry of those who consider the square-room a fire, and who are tortured by their inherited ideas. This melodious chanting of the self is stronge and healthy.

And if one complains that in this holy health there are no thoughts of salvation, no metaphors for philosophers and thinkers, the answer is that the cycle in nature goes on. The present cry of autumn is superseded by the spring which in turn yield to summer,

So health follows health. As for salvation, it is something which concerns afterlife, but nothing is comparable with this life, the present life. Or, if there is, it is faster than the weather, and the change of seasons, faster than any character. For it is more than a scene in the human world. If the world is to be pieced together by ideas, they should not *be* those which create scenes of murders, hanging and guillotine.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Though apparently a plea for enjoying life as it is in the midst of the change of season, "Parochial Themes" is consistent with Stevens' ideas on order, shaping, and worldview. Reality does not exist in philosophical, religious or political ideas of old; rather, it is found in the world and one must approach it and apprehend it directly. Secondly, this life with all its "halloo" is more holy than all ideas about salvation, or ideas about the order in the world. For any order has to be perceived through the senses and imagination and not with the help of books and scriptures. Reality is too much to be grasped and pieced together with bare hands. In this sense, the poem is not at all "Parochial" despite its title; it is basically concerned with Stevens' worldview on reality.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. Long-tailed ponies go nosing the pine-lands,
Ponies of Parisians shooting on the hill.
The wind blow. In the wind, the voices
Have shapes that are not yet fully themselves,
Are sounds blown by a blower into shapes,
The blower squeezed to the thinnest *mi* of falset to.

Explanation—These opening lines of Walace Stevens' "Parochial Themes" describe a natural setting in pine-lands where the Parisian hunters are busy shooting on the hill. There is life in the whole forest, because every thing here is lively and so appealing to the human imagination. As the wind blows through the pine trees one can hear musical sounds which have not yet fully acquired the shape of a definite music, but are very much like the sounds blown by piper into shapes especially when the blower produces the thinnest *mi* sound in a pitched human cry. That the poet is here describing an actual, literal forest without any intention of surcharging the landscape with symbolism is made clear when a moment later he says that "these are the forests." The poem thus reveals Stevens' delight in nature as well as his capacity to enjoy a landscape without any imaginative projections of his own mind.

2. This health is holy, this descant of a self,
This barbarous chanting of what is strong, this blare.
But salvation here? What about the rattle of sticks
On tins and boxes ? What about horses eaten by wind ?
When spring comes and the skeletons of the hunters
Stretch themselves to rest in their first summer's sun,
The spring will have a health of its own, with none
Of autumn's halloo in its hair.

Explanation—The beauty of the natural landscape in "Parochial Themes" and the liveliness prevailing there naturally leads the poet to answer a traditional question which someone may raise: "But salvation here ?" Can man do with a sheer delight in the natural landscape and not think of his salvation and paradise? Or should he ignore the unpleasant sounds of tins and boxes of hunters or the occasional difficulties that the hunters and the horses may experience in the forest? Stevens' answer is that this health in the forest, is itself holy with the halloo, halloo going on. This sound is enough to dominate the cry of all those who consider the square room a fire. What is more, argues Stevens, the landscape in the midst of change of seasons offers health at every stage. When the autumn is over, it is superseded by spring which has its own kind of music and health to offer. Similarly, spring yields to the summer which too has its own health and music. The cycle in nature goes on, and offers something much more than stale ideas about salvation, afterlife and paradise.

17. THE POEMS OF OUR CLIMATE

Introduction

Wallace Stevens not only wrote what can be called modern poems because of their modernist stance, but also liked to theorize about poetry. His "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" is of course his most remarkable piece of theorizing in verse, but in some shorter poems, such as "Of Modern Poetry" and "Poetry is a Destructive Force," Stevens was deeply involved in a mental debate about the nature of modern poetry. "The Poems of Our Climate" belongs to this category. By referring to a beautiful but simple picture of white and pink carnations in a porcelain bowl, he emphasizes how this simple beauty no longer attracts a modern artist whose concern is with complexity rather than simplicity.

SUMMARY

The poem consists of three stanzas of blank verse. The opening stanza consists of ten lines, while the last two consist of seven lines each.

Stanza 1

The poem opens with a picture of still, beautiful carnations (garden plants with sweet-smelling flowers) in a porcelain bowl. The picture is perfect in its restraint and simplicity. There is a brilliant porcelain bowl containing fresh and clear water. Inside the bowl, there are white and pink carnation plants. The light in the room is as white as snow, and it reflects snow-whiteness in the whole of the room. It seems to create a scene of a winter afternoon after the snowfall. Beautiful though the pink and white carnations are, one desires much more than this primitive simplicity. For the simple, restrained design of the porcelain bowl with these carnations colours the whole atmosphere with its bare simplicity. One wishes there were something more than this, something far more complex to attract the imagination.

Stanza 2

The second stanza builds on the first by emphasizing the need for something more than this restrained and simple beauty of carnations in the porcelain bowl. For even if this picture of complete simplicity could please a person and help him get rid of all torments that the "evilly compounded" self imposes; even if this simple, restrained beauty of the scene coloured the whole atmosphere with crystal clear water, brilliant porcelain, and filled the beholder with an impression of freshness, still the beholder, especially a modern perceiver, will expect something more, much more than the simple snowy white colour and snowy scents.

Stanza 3

The concluding stanza then offers the explanation why the modern mind would not be satisfied with the bare beauty and simplicity of the object described. Human mind, especially the modern mind, is restless, and will not be satisfied with traditional simplicity of this kind. Even if a modern man wanted to seek escape, this porcelain bowl with the fresh carnations in it, will not be able to provide that escape. For this means of escape is too traditional to attract the modern mind. What is more, the perfection this picture contains in its simplicity is something inconsistent with the human mind which knows that "The imperfect is our paradise." So this may be a sight for his grandmother, but not for the modern viewer. Since the imperfect is so strong and powerful within man, it seeks expression in something which is not so perfect and simple but in something that consists of "flawed words" and "stubborn unharnessed sounds, so as to accompany the imperfection within the composer.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

But for the title "The Poems of Our Climate" and the last three lines, the poem could be easily mistaken for a descriptive piece. Descriptive it certainly is, but in Stevens "description is revelation" and what this poem describes is the poet's idea about modern poetry. Appropriately enough, the picture that the poem describes in its first stanza is simple, tame, bare and subdued, even though it is perfect in its snow-white beauty. In Stevens' symbolism, the picture does not fit, because for him the world of white and snowy scents is part of the idea of the traditional beauty. It is decorative in an old-fashioned manner which might have appealed to the grandmother of a modern viewer, who is much more complex in his responses to a work of art, whether it is a peom or a painting.

As the picturesque bowl·stands, it lacks the "complication, the difficult dissonance" which the modern mind finds beautiful. As Daniel Fuchs observes, "The still life conceals the struggles within ourselves. It is an evasion of reality." It cannot fascinate a modern viewer who is "evilly compounded." By this term, says Fuchs, Stevens "means born out of difficulty, complexity, struggle and pain. This is the final conception of the modern self. It has the beauty of difficulty. For this reason the still life is inadequatet It reduces winter to a genteel domestic phenomenon." One mus. come out of this escape and face the difficulties of being, for "our paradise" is an imperfect paradise. And so the beauty that a modern man appreciates is not the beauty of perfect simplicity, but something that shows imperfection, struggle, pain and arduousness. The poem also demonstrates the paradoxical interaction between man's own imperfection and his rage for perfection. As James Baird describes this paradoxical rage, "Imperfect in ourselves we struggle toward purity. Delight lies in the encounter with the endless stubbornness of language. In the winter scene applicable to Stevens, the shaper, we know that delight lay for him in the passion for design. To exert the will to normalize the stubborn, to seek to 'wrench' meaning from chaos, is only to aspire to be pure." This is Stevens' concern throughout his poetry. In Stevens' poetry, according to Northrop Frye, " 'The imperfect is our paradise,' and the only order worth having is the 'violent order' produced by the exploration of imaginative energy which is also a great disorder."

"The Poems of Our Climate" thus not only demonstrates Stevens' view on what modern poetry should be but also exemplifies this view by rejecting the perfection of simplicity and showing the poet's preference for "flawed words and stubborn sounds."

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Stanza 1

The opening stanza of Wallace Stevens' "The Poems of Our Climate" provides an illustration of beauty in its traditional simplicity and perfection. There is a clear water in a porcelain bowl inside a room. Inside the bowl, there are white and pink carnations (garden plants with sweet-smelling flowers). The light in the room is as white as snow and there is an aura of whiteness in everything, as though an atmosphere of fresh snowfall pervades the whole room. Soon however, the reader observes that this perfect artistic picture in the room is taken as an illustration and is not meant to be a simple description. Though the beauty of the carnations in the porcelain bowl with its appropriate white light and snowy atmosphere in the room is a specimen of perfection, yet one is not content with this simple perfection: the human mind surely seeks much more than that. Though the design in its beauty, simplicity and classical restraint seems to be perfect, it still leaves out one thing : the complexity that the modern mind looks for in every work of art, be it a poem or a painting. This is why the last line of the stanza expresses dissatisfaction "with nothing more than the carnations there." This raises the question: what does the modern mind really want modern poetry to do ? The question is answered in the next two stanzas : "Still one would want more, one would need more" and "There would still remain the never-resting mind."

Stanza 2

This second stanza of Wallace Stevens' "The Poems of Our Climate" builds on the beautiful illustration provided in the first stanza : white and pink carnations in a beautiful porcelain bowl in the white, snowy atmosphere of the room. Though the picture of this "complete simplicity" could rid one of all of one's torments and conceal his evilly compounded self, a self that is not satisfied with simple purity but looks for complication, and though this picture could make one feel fresh in a world of pristine purity that the art object with its perfection provides, still one would look for more, need more than this simplicity of a perfect design. One surely, says Stevens' persona, needs more than a world of white and snowy scents. For the "evilly-compounded I" (the self that is born of difficulty, complexity, struggle and pain) will not be fully satisfied with art of this kind in its restraint, simplicity and perfection: instead, it looks for complexity and difficulty which are a part of his being. No wonder, the poems of our climate should satisfy this hunger for difficulty, complexity, struggle and pain which provide a strange kind of pleasure to the modern self.

Stanza 3

The third stanza of "The Poems of Our Climate" offers the final comments on Stevens' idea that the "evilly-compounded" self of a modern man is not satisfied with classical simplicity and purity of design but longs for complexity and arduousness which are a part of his being. The modern mind is restless and will not be satisfied with the kind of escape that the bare simple design of white and pink carnations in a porcelain bowl provides. He would rather escape into the difficulty and complexity which are part of his self and of his existence in the modern world. For the modern man knows that he cannot look up to a perfect paradise; his fate is rather to live on the earth which is an imperfect paradise. As such what can really delight a modern mind is the imperfection, which is part of the modern self as well as the modern world. And the best artistic expression of modern experience can come not in bare and restrained design of classical purity and beauty, but in those imperfect shapes which are familiar to the modern man. His poems must therefore reveal the imperfection that is "so hot in us," and must express modern sensibility in "flawed words and stubborn sounds."

18. THE GLASS OF WATER

Introduction

As pointed out earlier, in many of his poems, Stevens writes about poetry itself. Reality, imagination and the interaction between the two are his recurrent concerns. So is the tension between reason and imagination. The former is usually represented by metaphysicians or realists and philosophers, pejoratively in "The Palaz of Hoon," positively in "To an Old Philosopher of Rome." Imagination, on the other hand, is the subject of a majority of poems, especially "The Man with a Blue Guitar," "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," "Sunday Morning," "The Idea of Order at Key West," and many others. "The Glass of Water" explores the relation between cold reason and prosaic reality on the one hand and imagination and poetic perception on the other. It is in fact a dialectic of imagination and reality, or a debate between a metaphysician and a poet.

SUMMARY

"The Glass of Water" consists of four stanzas of five lines each. The rhythm and tone, as well as diction and the writer's attitude toward the subject varies from stanza to stanza in accordance with the complex development of the idea.

Stanza 1

The poem opens with a pointed reference to a prosaic glass of water, as viewed by a metaphysician or a rationalist. The tone of the stanza is, understandably enough, pedagogic. There is a glass of water in the centre as the object of dialectic. To a metaphysician it is nothing but a glass of water: the glass would melt if it is heated; the water would freeze in cold. For him it proves only one thing: namely "that this object is merely a state,/One of many between the two poles." The binary method of examining an object is here presented as a limited one in its scope: "So,/In the metaphysical, there are these poles."

Stanza 2

The next stanza looks at the same glass of water but from an imaginative, rather than rational, perspective. The glass of water still stands in the centre where it was in the opening stanza, but now light (the ferocious power of imagination) pounces upon it like a lion who has come to drink water from a pool in a forest in spring. Though it is in the same place and in the same state, the glass now becomes a forest pool. It is now coloured with the ferocious light of imagination:

> Ruddy are his eyes and ruddy are his claws
> When light comes down to wet his frothy jaws.

In this section, as Daniel Fuchs remarks, "The dialectic is too clearly drawn, the metaphors are too heavily underscored, too patently labelled, and the rhyme rhymes too much" (Note especially the rhyme in the lines quoted above).

Stanza 3

The third stanza goes on with the metaphor of lion for light but toward the end it also adds a new dimension. As the lion of light comes to the glass of water to drink water from it, the glass become a pool. The imagination begins to weave its fabric, so that even moving weeds (not in the glass but pure product of the imagination) can be seen in this forest pool. The state of "The Glass of Water" has undergone a considerable change by now. The figure of the weeds disturbs the all-too-perfect picture. But there is also another state now, perhaps the state of the mind of the beholder: light is refracted from the glass of water and these consequent refractions, the metaphysical, begin to invade the mind of the poet-artist. But the artist-poet, humorously presented here as "fat Jocundus," worries about another centre, other than the one offered by the glass of water.

Stanza 4

The poet-metaphysician, fat Jocundus, is worried not about "what stands here in the centre," that is, the glass of water; he is

instead, concerned with what stands in the centre of human life, time and day. For the refracted light also brings in to his mind the thoughts of daily reality among "the politicians/Playing cards." He will have to discover the centre that governs life in an ordinary "village of the indigenes," the native people. And this reality he will have to seek among the dogs and dung. These two sets of ideas will thus begin to clash in the mind of the poetmetaphysician.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Structure and Imagery

The four stanzas of "The Glass of Water" contain three movements within them, apart from exposition of the static condition of the object ("The Glass of Water") in the opening stanza. As James Bairds describes these three movements (his word is "scenes,"). in the first of these "light strikes the glass and invades the water;" in the second, "the imagination seizes the object and converts it to a jungle pool with moving water weeds;" in the third, "the poet finds his purpose with these "plastic parts of the poems" threatened as the demands of the real world, a state imperilled by a politicians' card game, intrude." The metaphor of the lion for light, which is in fact, the poetic imagination is a recurrent metaphor in Stevens' poetry. The glass of water is an example to i llustrate the relation between reality and imagination.

The Central Theme

The subject matter of the poem is poetry, and this poem, like "The Poems of Our Climate," "The Ultimate Poem," and "Poetry is a Destructive Force," is a kind of glass on that theoretical poem entitled "Of Medern Poetry." The dialectic is only apparently between a metaphysician and a poet or imaginer; essentially, it is a poet's dialectic with himself in his own mind. As Daniel Fuchs sums up the central thematic concern of this poem, "More than a simple physical opposition, more than a calendar picture sense of poetry, poetry is seen here as a violent business. Fat Jocundus, the happy hedonist as sober metaphysician, transcend pat notions of his craft. For him, poetry has to do with reality as it manifests itself in the life that is lived in the scene compesed around us. It is neither picturesque nor ennobling. It is, in fact, dull, homely, dirty. As his most ironic, then, the metaphysician tells us that the dialectic which yields truth for him is one which concerns violent ideas and imaginings and unpropitious facts." Though basically a dandiacal poem, "The Glass of Water" thus shows the poet as integrated with his society, with the prosaic reality that surrounds him.

According to James Baird, however, the poem shows a tension between the poet's imagination and the energy of physical reality. He adds that "the utter commonplaceness of the glass of

water is deliberately chosen. It reveals a characteristic discipline of Stevens' like that seen in the strict imagery of 'Tattoo.' Here is a microcosm of a prosaic world, waiting for the invasion of light and the answering jungle spring of the imagination. Yet one feels the 'drag' of the prosaic, the evil and the vitiating, in what one lives of necessity in his 'village of the indigenes.' Between the village and the metaphysica that crash in the mind there is a tension of the artist. Yet light is with him everywhere. Its challenge is constant."

Some critics, on the other hand, believe that the tension is resolved in the poem. David H. Owen, for example, thinks that "light is the imagination" and that "the pool, the water itself, calms the lion, and the synthesis of imagination and fact, while including the evil aspects, can itself be a thing of beauty."

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Stanza 1

The opening stanza of "The Glass of Water" like that of "The Poems of Our Climate" begins with an illustration of the idea that Stevens wants to develop in the poem a little later. The example this time is that of a water, plain and prosaic, rather than simple, but beautiful and pure. This simple prosaic object is examined in this stanza from the standpoint of a rationalist or metaphysician. For him the glass of water is nothing but simply a glass of water. If this is taken up as an object of dialectic, the things seem to be too obvious. The glass would melt in heat while the water inside it will freeze in cold. So, for the metaphysician and the rationalist, the glass of water proves only one things: namely, that this object is merely a state, one of many between the two poles; for the metaphysician will allow only two poles. In other words, this pedagogic and binary method of examining an object is rather simplistic and misleading, For the viewer in this paricular case brings no imagination to bear upon the object he perceives. For Stevens, on the other hand, an object is not only what it in itself is, or what it seems to the viewer, but simultaneously both: it is the result of the interaction between the subject (perceiver) and the object (the thing perceived).

Sanza 2

In this stanza, the same object, the glass of water, remains the focal point of discussion. But this time it is examined from an imaginative rather than rationalist perspective. The glass of water still stands at the centre, but now light (the ferocious power of imagination, pounces upon it as a lion jumps to the pool of water to drink water. So, the glass of water now becomes a a pool since it is now coloured with the ferocious light of imagina-

tion. The last two lines create a picture of this imaginary lion of light in his complete ferocity. In this stanza, as Daniel Fuchs observes, "The dialectic is too clearly drawn, the metaphors are too heavily underscored, too patently labelled, and the rhyme rhymes too much. Thematically, the stanza introduces Stevens' central thought that an object is more than what it seems to a rationalist.

Stanza 3

The next stanza, stanza 3 of "The Glass of Water" continues with the metaphor of lion for the light which metaphorically represents the ferocious power of human imagination. As the light has now transformed a simple and prosaic glass of water into a pool, the imagination begins to weave its fabric. As a result one can see (or imagine) the winding weeds growing in this pool (which is in fact the simple glass of water). The figure of the weeds disturbs the simple picture. But there is clearly another state of vision which has become apparent by now: light is refracted from the glass of water and as a result of this refraction, the mind of the poet-imaginer is invaded by different kinds of ideas (metaphysica). But the poet-artist, here humorously represented by fat Jocundus, is now worried about another centre, other than the centre which the glass of water had hithertofore occupied.

Stanza 4

The concluding stanza of "The Glass of Water" then reveals what the poet-imaginer, fat Jocundus of the third stanza, is worried about. His concern is with what occupies the central position in human life. For the refracted thoughts, the metaphysica which the lion of light has caused to be refracted from the glass of water, bring him back to the reality of the physical world, the reality where politicians are engaged in playing their cards. He will now have to look for the centre which governs the life of ordinary people living in their villages. He would have to struggle for his ideas in the reality of dogs and dung. This concluding stanza thus introduces yet another perspective on reality. What is the reality of the glass of water—is it the reality that the prosaic rationalist sees? the reality that the poet's imagination shows to him? Or is it the reality of "dogs and dung" which escapes both the rationalist and the poet? In other words, only that perspective can claim to have observed reality which combines all the three approaches, or better still, uses a combination of ferocious imagination and plain every day reality.

19. CONNOISSEUR OF CHAOS

Introduction

"Connoisseur of Chaos" is yet another poem which shows Stevens grappling with the tension between order and disorder,

imagination and reality. Wallace Stevenes, according to Daniel Fuchs, "has always been aware of the precariousness of man's endeavour to create a meaningful order just as he has always been aware of the limitations of an order which is no longer meaningful." This is simply the subject matter of "Connoisseur of Chaos" which is in fact a discussion of this problem. The poem states two propositions: (A) "A violent order is disorder" and (B) "A great disorder is an order." Section two of the poem demonstrates the argument of A by suggesting that in a violent order imposed from outside (usually by religion, philosophy or morality, or by any preconceived notion of reality," disorder reigns supreme. Section 3 supports proposition B which emphasizes that a "great disorder is an order." It emphasizes how reality and man's life are a chaos, and how an order born of the inherent antithesis in these becomes a genuine order out of disorder. In Section 4, proposition A is taken up once again. A returns to the old order and tries to offer a truth but in the process helps only to expand the disorder of truths. Section 5 presents an image of the "pensive man" who sees "that eagle float/For which the intricate Alps are a single nest." In other words, the eagle, which is a symbol for the imagination, makes a nest out of the chaos.

SUMMARY

Section 1

Section 1 consists of only three lines and it supplies the two propositions which are to be discussed in the poem. The proposition offered by A is that "A violent order is a disorder," by which A means that any order imposed from outside, such as the one imposed by religion or philosophy or any system of beliefs. Proposition B, on the other hand, asserts that "a great disorder is order." By this B means that the antithesis between things, American white and the black African, or man and woman, may provide an order out of the apparent disorder. But when B moves on to the next sentence, —"These/Two things are one" —the relation between proposition A and proposition B becomes more teasing and complex. For the moment, it is enough to say that in a dialectic of change the two statements are really one ; for both suggest a need for order, whether old or new) supported by propositions A and B respectively).

Section 2

This section illustrates proposition A in a mock-serious, dogmatic manner:

> If all the green of spring was blue, and it is;
> If the flowers of South Africa were bright
> On the tables of Connecticutt, and they are;
> Of Englishmen lived without tea in Ceylon, and they do ;. . .

Order is born out of the antithesis between green grass in spring and the blue sky between Africa's exotic flowers and a prosaic tables in Connecticut ; between Englishmen owning tea plantations in Ceylon and themselves disliking tea. Everything goes on in an orderly way, emphasizing the old order of unity out of diverstiy, a unity born out of antithesis. This kind of unity, says the connoisseur, is as pleasant as the boughs painted by Marchand (a contemporary French painter), with the strokes of brush. The repetitious refrain of "and it is," "and they are" shows the dogmatism inherent in this kind of order. The connoisseur looks at the antithesis between the things, the exotic African flowers on Connecticut tables, the blue sky and the green grass, and notes a complete harmony between them.

Section 3

The next section begins by apparently agreeing with this kind of interpretation:

> After all the pretty contrast of life and death
> Proves that these opposite things partake of one.

But that this is a theory to be rejected becomes clear in the next lines: "At least that was the theory, when bishops' books/Resolved the world." The attitude here is simply irreverent. This is how the old order, the violently and stringently imposed order on chaos resolved the antinomies. But we cannot go back to that kind of violent order, which according to A is equivalent to disorder: for

> The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind.

Nevertheless, relation is indeed perceptible. One does note the shade of a cloud on sand, or a shape on the side of a hill. Reality survives the assaults of violent order which is disorder. The new order, which is a "great disorder" in order, does however emerge, no matter how precarious it seems at the moment. As James Baird comments on this section, "In section 3, proposition B (apparently the new and the modern) argues a disorder exhibiting order which is imaginative process, as the "squirming facts exceed the squamous mind. Thus order in the second proposition is the inevitability of proliferation from disorder."

Section 4

Section 4 brings the two propositions side by side. First the proponent of proposition A returns to the old order and offers a truth, but by doing so only helps to expand the disorder of truths. The proponent of proposition A here, appears as a tired Hegelian.

> Well, an old order is a violent one.
> This proves nothing. . . . Just one more truth, one more
> Element in the immense disorder of truths.

But Proposition B cuts this cliche-ridden statement short. The winds of change in a new spring season are blowing, as it is the month of April. All this will pass and come to summer soon. So dialectically all truths of the old order together make a disorder because of the winds of change; conversely, all disorders of the new and modern lead towards an order, an order out of disorder. Reality, as much as the life of man, is chaos, and it is the poet-metaphysician, the connoisseur of chaos (here the connoisseur is the poet-knower, and *chaos* is abyss in the Greek sense of the term) who can impose a potential, tentative order in the midst of change.

The rest of this section provides a synthesis between the two propositions. A and B are not like fixed proposition, like statutory posed/For a vista in the Louvre. Instead, they are a tentative outline for a thoughtful man to think over.

Section 5

It is the pensive man, the poet-knower-thinker (in short, the "connoisseur of chaos" in the sense described above) who can impose an order of imagination on the chaos of reality, much in the same manner that the eagle makes a nest on the intricate Alps. The soaring eagle, it should be noted, is Stevens' symbol for imagination. It is this kind of conniosseurship that will provide the pensive man an intimate, even if intricate, home.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Theme

The central theme of the poem is the problematic relation between the shaping imagination and the chaos of reality. One way to shape the existing chaos, the world in a state of change, is to accept the old notions of "bishops' books" and thereby to resove the antithesis between opposites. But the "squirming facts" in a world of change far exceed the old squamous minds (and by implication, the old orders). So the old order is not only violent because stringently imposed from outside, it is also outdated because it cannot take into account the reality which keeps on changing like the changing seasons. It is precisely because of this fact that each connoisseur must discover and order the chaos of reality anew, since an order, however, modern it may be, will become a "violent disorder" after some time. This is quite consistent with Stevens' concept of order which, according to him, is a combination of the external reality and the perceiver's imagination. After all, in "Anecdote of the Jar" it is a tiny jar, bare and barren, which imposes an order on the "slovenly wildernesses of Tennessee; in "The Idea of Order at Key West" it is the solitary singer's music which imposes on order an the sea-side.

Secondly, the poet makes it clear that one order contains the other order: "These two things are one." So any old idea which thinks of resolving the conflict between two sets of opposites through a metaphysical concept of unity must become violent, because it will fail to take into account the simple fact of change. An order will be born out of disorder if the disorder that prevails in a world of cnange is properly accounted for. The idea becomes clearer, if one compares "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." As Daniel Fuchs compares the two, "Stevens states (in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction") that one of the characteristic of this fiction is that it must change. This change is seen as a function of Stevens' modest dialectic, which embraces such primal dependent opposites as man and woman, day and night, the imagined and the real. The supreme fiction must rest on the organic bases of natural life; it must include the sense of change which we are inured to and indeed come to love. It must include the common antithesis of the life cycle. We derive these antitheses, and by extension, the supreme fiction, from intuition":

> Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
> And forth the particulars of rapture come.
> Music falls on the silence like a sense,
> A passion that we feel, not understand.

Tentative as all perceptions of reality are, Stevens makes no pompous claims; his propositions are, instead, cast in an ephemeral mould. His theme, underlying the debate about order, is the mystery of challenging and fascinating complexity, the "dreadful miscellaneousness of life," in Fuchs' phrase. And it is this complexity and miscellaneousness on and under the rock of reality that the connoisseur of chaos must master and express in a poetic or artistic shape. In the words of Jámes Baird, "Cezanne's renderings of Mont Sainte-Victorie, the structure of reality first mastered and then altered as imagination dictates, do not differ theoretically from Stevens' acts upon chaos. Certainly there was a "greater intimacy with self," to repeat Fernandez; but 'the greater intimacy with things' was not an illusion."

Structure

"The Connoisseur of Chaos" is itself a fine example of a design imposed on a chaos of ideas. The opening section states the problem in the form of a conundrum: A violent order is disorder; a great disorder is an order: These two things are one. Sections two and three illustrate by concrete detail the two propositions. Section four then states the two together with a greater emphasis on proposition B and a categorical rejection of proposition A. The final section, almost as brief as the opening section. resolves the dilemma in favour of the shaping imagination, the eagle (imagination) making his nest on the high rocks of Alps (the

solid reality). This also explains the riddle involved in the opening section: These two things are one. That is, an order is born when imagination shapes the chaos of reality, duly recognizing the fact of change which is the theme of the penultimate section.

The style and diction of the poem are comparable to those of "The Glass of Water." There is decorum in the presentation of dry truths in a metaphysical discussion. The illustrations in the second section with the refrain "and it is" verge on the comic but the image of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill seriously supports the proposition that "a great disorder is an order," that is, when it is shaped by imagination. As a result, one laughs at the participants in the debate as much as at the connoisseur of chaos; simultaneously, however, one is also aware of the serious dialectic underlying the interplay of words and images, so that by the end of the poem the poet emerges as a "connoisseur of chaos," one who has somehow shaped the confusion of antithetical ideas into a complex poetic whole.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. A. A violent order is disorder; and

   B. A great disorder is an order. These
   Two things are one.

Explanation—These two propositions open the debate of Stevens' "Connoisseur of Chaos." The first of the two propositions is offered by : "A violent order is disorder." By this A means that any order imposed on reality from without and with a certain violence and stringency is the equivalent of disorder. Such orders normally come from dogmatic philosophies and religions which try to explain the present reality from a fixed point of view. Proposition B states that a great disorder is indeed an order. The implication of this view is that all disorder includes in itself some kind of order, or at least a search for order. When things of different kinds, for example, are placed together in a heap, their simple co-existence will suggest an order. This confirms the second statement of B that "These two things are one." Order and disorder are complementary, rather than antagonistic; for both suggest man's endeavour to create order out of disorder. The "chaos" in the title of the poem is thus synonymous with disorder, whereas anyone who creates order out of it is the "connoisseur of chaos."

2. If all the green of spring was blue, and it is;
   If the flowers of South Africa were bright
   On the tables of Connecticut, and they are;
   If Englishmen lived without tea in Ceylon, and they do;
   . . . . a law of inherent opposities,
   Of essential unity, is as pleasant as port,

As pleasant as the brush strokes of a bough
An upper, particular bough in, say, Marchand.

Explanation—These lines, taken from the second section of Wallace Stevens' "Connoisseur of Chaos" illustrate proposition A regarding order as presented in the opening stanza of this poem. The method of argument and illustration is dogmatic and mock-serious. Order is born out of the antithesis between green grass in spring and the blue sky, between Africa's exotic flowers and a prosaic, domestic table in Connecticut in America; between Englishmen owning tea plantations in Ceylon and their aversion for tea which they produce and sell. In the traditional order, everything goes on in this orderly way because order is conceived out of disparate elements. This kind of unity, according to the connoisseur of chaos, is, however, as artistic and fictive as the boughs painted by a French artist Marchand, with a stroke of his brush. But the mock-serious tone of the whole passage recoils on the speaker of proposition A. The repetition of "it is" and "they are" is tongue-in-cheek and it suggests a violent disorder in this concept or order. Though there is hardly anything in common between the exotic African flowers and the domestic table in America, yet the traditional champions of order, like the proponent of proposition A, insist that order is born out of antithesis, and therefore these disparate elements constitute an order. Such an order will be a violent disorder.

3. After all the pretty contrast of life and death
Proves that these opposite things partake of one,
At least that was the theory, when bishops' books
Resolved the world. We cannot go back to that.
The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind,
If one may say so.

Explanation—These lines from Stevens' "Connoisseur of Chaos" first mock and then reject the traditional concept of unity out of diversity, of harmony in antithesis. Old religious preachers and philosophers in their efforts to find meaning in the chaos of the world and human existence noted the antithesis between opposities, but somehow tried to resolve it by imposing on it a design of their own. They argued that life and death, opposite though they are, yet partake of the same substance just as every opposite thing is united in a harmony. The poet, however, rejects this theory on the ground that this is too old and fragile a belief to convince the modern mind: "We cannot go back to that." What is more, these traditional conepts of order, found in the bishops' books, do not take stock of the chaos of reality. The squirming facts surely exceed the order-hunting minds. Reality is certainly stronger and more tangible than any concepts of such violent order imposed from outside.

4. The pensive man. . . . He sees that eagle float
For which the intricate Alps are a single nest.

Explanation—These concluding lines from Wallace Stevens' "Connoisseur of Chaos" sum up the poet's ideas on the relation between order and disorder discussed in the rest of the poem. It is not traditional concepts of order, which is described and rejected as "violent disorder," that can provide any relevant ideas of order. It is rather the pensive man, the poet-knower-thinker, in short, the "Connoisseur of Chaos" who can impose an order of imagination on the chaos of reality, much in the same way that an eagle (symbolic of imagination in 'Stevens' poetry) makes its nest on the intricate Alps. The image of the eagle's nest is highly appropriate here. For, built on the rock symbolizing reality, it is a product of the imagination. At the same time, this takes into account the winds of change which threaten this nest on a high rock in the mountains. But this indeed is the right order, no matter how fragile or momentary it is. After all the order imposed by the music of solitary girl in "The Idea of Order at Key West" is an equally momentary order which has measured out the portions of the sea and created a new musical order by the seaside. The conclusion is thus quite consistent with Stevens' views on imaginative order as opposed to the violent traditional orders which are here dismissed as disorders.

20. THE SENSE OF THE SLEIGHT-OF-HAND MAN

Introduction

Wallace Stevens did not believe in any mythologies of the past, or in any heaven or paradise in after life. In "Ploughing on Sunday" and "Sunday Morning," he shows a characteristic exhiliration of living in this world and in this life. Since ideas of the past and of afterlife come as a barrier to the living of this life in this world, Stevens' tone towards such ideas and the people who hold them is satirical, as in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman." "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man" is one such poem which satirizes old, anti-life ideas.

SUMMARY

The first stanza begins with the enjoyment of life in this world as an accepted fact. If the old impressed the people with marvellous ideas of religious awe, the new has its own marvels to offer:

One's grand flights, one's Sunday baths,
One's tootings at the weddings of the soul
Occur as they occur.

The opening thus reminds one of "Sunday Morning" or "Ploughing on Sunday." If prayers and church-going on Sundays are marvellous, one's grand flights and Sunday baths, and trumpeting of sounds on the communion of the souls occur as they occur. As Daniel Fuchs comments on the first stanza, "Here wading in religiosity is given its satiric recompense. 'Sunday baths' is marvellous. It is the key-note of the grandiosity of the first stanza which is a description of the windy, the cloudy, the empty-in short, the old belief." If "bluish clouds" appeared on empty houses and the leaves of an evergreen shrub with large flowers (rhododendrons) "rattled" their gold on this house as if someone lived there, it might have seemed marvellous to the old imagination. The floods of white pouring down from the clouds and spreading their halo on the earth might have occurred in the olden myths. But the wind of change threw its strength around the sky and resisted them.

The second stanza questions the old myths. The wheel of fortune is replaced with the wheel of the sun in its savage energy. If the old myths have any relevance, these only indicate the super-structure imposed on reality by imagination. So what is wrong with the new myths, like the myth of the wheel of the sun? Reality, after all, survives all myths. The fire-eye of the sun survives the clouds. One might as well create more earthly myths and think of a dove with an eye of grenadine, or of pines as cornets, and of the whole earth as a small island full of geese and stars. The point is that if anyone can come in direct contact with reality, bare of all human projections, it is perhaps the ignorant man. For it is only he who has any chance of mating his life with life, that is to say, the sensuous reality that surrounds him and of which he himself is part. It is life, lived in its sensuous reality, and enjoyed as "pearly spouse," that prevails even in the most cold and abstract ideas about life.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

"The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man" is yet another poem which satirizes human projections and asks for an acceptance of reality. If the past has its own myth about the Wheel of Fortune the wheel of the sun is a constant reality for anyone to see without, of course, any myth-making mind and illusions. The vision that Stevens creates is one of reality in its sensuousness. As Daniel Fuchs remarks, "The last vision is charming in its naivete; but it is a naivete achieved, not a naivete born. But Stevens has a warm feeling for the latter as well. The poet shares with the ignorant man a free and intuitive response to reality:"

> It may be that the ignorant man, alone
> Has any chance to mate his life with life
> That is the sensual, pearly spouse, the life
> That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze.

Even the most sober disillusioned thought, "the wintriest bronze," cannot dispel the charm of natural beauty." It needs to be added, however, that "the pearly spouse reality—but the beloved reality known by the imagintion" (Susan Weston).

This poem is thus an important clue about Stevens' view of reality and imagination. For it not only satirizes the old attitudes and ideas which are a barrier to the understanding and appreciation of reality but also envisions an imaginative perception of reality bare of religious or philosophical projections. In this connection the remarks of William York Tindall are worth quoting: "To enjoy the sun and bright wings without thought was the constant desire of thinking Stevens. Elegant rhetorician, poet of the double vision, he longed to see things with a single eye, without monocle, and he longed in vain. But sometimes, like some of his thinkers, he approached success. His poems of the thing itself are among his brightest, whether announcements of his desire or its approximate achievements. In 'The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man' one's 'grand flights,' 'soulful tootings,' and 'Sunday baths...occur as they occur.' So clouds in a blue sky so bluejays. To mate one's life with these one must be ignorant at the dawn." That the appreciation of reality was Stevens' constant concern is clear from his other poems as well. The following lines from this poem:

> It may be that the ignorant man, alone,
> Has any chance to mate his life with life
> That is the sensual, pearly spouse—

occur again in Stevens' longer poem "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" wherein Stevens thinks of the "ignorant man" as the right perceiver of reality:

> You must become an ignorant man again
> And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
> And see it clearly in the idea of it.

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Stanza 1

The first stanza of Stevens' "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man" begins in the hedonistic strain, emphasizing the need to enjoy the earthly reality as it is. If the prayers and church-going on Sundays are marvellous, so are the grand flights, Sunday baths and trumpeting of sounds on the communion of the souls. All these occur as they occur. Why prefer one to the other? Or conversely, what is wrong with grand flights, and Sunday baths? Stevens thus questions the wading in religiosity and provides its satiric compensation in Sunday baths and grand flights of imagination. If

imaginary clouds, clouds created by the imagination of the perceiver, appeared above an old empty house and coloured the leaves of the ever-green shrubs as if someone lived there, it might be equally marvellous, or at least as marvellous as the imagination about the "wedding of souls" that the chruch and Christianity speak of. After all, floods of white pouring down from the clouds and spreading their halo on the earth might have led to the creation of many ancient myths. But the wind of change must have thrown its contorted strength around the sky and resisted them.

Stevens' main argument in this stanza, as William York Tindall summarizes it, is this: "To enjoy the sun and bright wings without thought was the constant desire of thinking Stevens......To mate one's life with these one must be ignorant as the dawn." In other words one must forget one's traditional ideas to look at reality and look at it afresh like an ignorant man.

Stanza 2

The second stanza of "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man" presents Setvens' ideas on the perception of reality much more forcefully than the first stanza which does it in a satiric manner. Here Stevens questions all old myths including one about the wheel, the wheel of fortune. It is now replaced with a new wheel, the wheel of the sun in its savage energy. Today, argues Stevens, if the old myths have any relevance it consists in the fact that they are the products of human imagination. So, if the old myths have any validity, there is nothing wrong with the new myth of the wheel of the sun, which is after all a real thing. It is reality which outlives all myths just as the fire-eye of the sun outlives the clouds that momentary hide it from the view. One might as well think of many new myths such as a dove with an eye of grenadine, of pines as cornets, or of the earth as a small island full of geese and stars. But the need of the hour is that one must discard all projections of the human mind and look at things with the ignorance of an ordinary man. Only then will there be a chance to mate life with life and establish a communion between the self and the sensuous realify of this world, here symbolized by the "pearly spouse." The poem thus restates Stevens' view that reality must be seen afresh and without projections of the human mind. This is a theme to which Stevens returns again and again, notably in the "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" in which the "ignorant man" is praised for his capacity to look at things as they really are.

21. CUISINE BOURGEOISE

Introduction

"Cuisine Bourgeoise" is one of the poems in Stevens' collection entitled *Parts of a World.* In this group of poems Stevens deplores the mechanism and inhumanity of the modern society wherever he talks about human beings. Days and nights, summer, autumn and winter pass without meaning much to the human beings who not only live in a machine age but whose souls and hearts are burdened with an inhuman mechanism. People feed on human heads, that is, old ideas given by politicians and there is no rule left for imagination which has itself become part of the weather in this mechanized world.

SUMMARY

The poem consists of three stanzas of eight lines each of blank verse. There is not much movement from one stanza to another, the only one being that of additional details supplied by the poet to illustrate how the cuisine (style of cooking) of the bourgeoise has nothing but old, irrelevant and outdated ideas to cook and serve.

Stanza 1

During these days of disinheritance, when man has lost contact not only with nature but also with his own imagination, we feed on old and stale ideas. Of course, birds continue to rebuild their old nests, and there is imagination (*blue* is Stevens' symbol for imagination) pervading the woods. But in the human world all freshness supplied by imagination is missing. Church-bells ring every Sunday, as mechanically as the wheels of the machines continue to rotate in the mills. There is no change in the dull routine. Things are as they used to be and they continue to be repeated mechanically. There was a time when men tossed in their beds with new ideas and women partook of the reality of the sun. Now this has all disappeared. The words are written but they have lost their speech because there is no freshness in them.

Stanza 2

Seasons come and go but they remain unnoticed. As a result the change of seasons which used to mean so much at one time has ceased to have any meaning now. Summer comes; but nobody experiences it as summer; autumn comes, and people are blind to its autumnal qualities. Similarly, time keeps on moving with its succession of days and nights, but life has become so mechanical that there is hardly any response to this succession of days and nights. Days come and go and remain unnoticed; nights come

but it seems that the lamp burnt a long time ago continues to burn and there is no change. Because of the death of idea and the prevalence of the old, there hardly seems to be a change in the human beings. It would seem that people of some years ago continued to watch the sky with an unanimated feeling as if they were not men but simply pieces of porcelain. They would not experiment, would not think and imagine for themselves. They have become part of the mechanical reality of the present, the reality imposed by science and its machines. As a result the feast on human heads (old, buried ideas) goes on.

Stanza 3

People seem to have become overly sedate, dumb and dead and so continue to feast on the huam heads (dead ideas) placed on cold leaves. It is on this diet of old ideas that we live and we no longer partake of the ancient cake of seed, the almond and deep fruit (our intellectual nourishment is no longer healthy and wholesome, unlike that of our ancestors who went in for such healthy diet for the mind). We live and are sustained by the bitter meat of stale ideas. Who, then, are the people seated at the dining table? Is the table nothing but a mirror in which the people look at their own reflections and eat them?

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The poem is a telling comment on the lack of imagination in the modern people. As James Baird comments on Stevens' views in this poem, "Humanity is disinherited of its power to see the physical world. The seasons pass without human perception. The only food is the bitter meat of heads, politicians' heads, the copious provision of ideas. Thus it is that Stevens speaks of the people who avoid "central things" who are insensible to the "blood-red redness of the sun." Stevens who is himself a votary of imagination is shocked by the people's incapacity for fresh experience and perception. As he believes in the interaction between the perceiver and the object of perception, he is disgusted with the attitude of the bourgeoise who simply look at present reality with the spectacles of their predecessors. As a result there is hardly any interaction between the subject (the perceiver) and the object (the object of perception).

For Stevens this state of modern mechanism is comparable to a feast in which stale, disgusting things are served as dishes. This is why the title of the poem is 'Cuisine Bourgeoise." The term bourgeoise is quite derogatory because it shows a lack of initiative, freshness and radicalism. Though Stevens was himself a bourgeoise in his political and economic views, he could very well understand and depict the lifelessness that belonged to most

bourgeoise. This is why he has bitterly satirized such bourgeoise in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman." In this poem, "Cuisine Bourgeoise," Stevens succeeds admirably in expressing his disgust for the thoughtless mechanism through the image of a horrible feast of human heads.

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Stanza 1

The opening stanza of Wallace Stevens' "Cuisine Bourgeoise" deplores the lack of initiative and imagination in his contempoia-ries. It seems that the people have lost their inheritance of ideas and imagination and, most significantly, their capacity to think and imagine. So, having no ideas of their own, they feed themselves on the stale ideas of past thinkers. Of course it is not entirely so in the world of nature, where the birds still show the capacity to rebuild their nests. Again, though the church keeps on ringing the bells on Sundays to remind people of how their predecessors were gifted with imagination, so much imagination that they created many religious and secular myths, yet that is all that happens during these days of disinheritance. It was not always so. There was a time when people used to lie on grass in the heat of the sun and imagine things; when women partook of the reality of the sun and men lay on their green beds of imagination. But the modern minds or at least the bourgeoise, have become so much mecha-nical in this machine age that they have lost all imagination. That is why they prefer to live on a feast of old heads, namely, the ideas left behind by thinkers and philosophers, poets and preachers of the past.

Stanza 2

The second stanza of "Cuisine Bourgeoise" further empha-sizes the lack of imagination among the modern people. It is not that the springs of sources which kindled imagination have dried up. Instead, these are as fresh and potential as ever. It is the human mind which has lost its contact with imagination. Today the change of seasons, which meant so much in the past, has ceased to have any meaning. Summer comes but its impact is never experienced; similarly, autumn comes and goes, but what it symbolized for the past thinkers remains unfelt and unexpressed. This happens with days and nights as well, which pass as with their regularity without meaning anything to the people of this bourgeoise, machine-age. It would seem that the old lamps still continue to burn. As a result there is hardly any change in the attitude of the people. It is natural because they have stopped thinking and imagining for themselves. They have chosen to

become part of the mechanical, quotidian reality around them without the gift of imagination to reshape this reality. No wonder, the feast of human heads, namely old and stale ideas, goes on and nobody feels disgusted with this feast, this cuisine bourgeoise! This image in the title aptly brings out Stevens' disgust for the lack of imagination among modern bourgeoise.

Stanza 3

The final stanza reinforces the image of the feast of human heads brought in on leaves which are crowned with the stale and dry old buds. People have lost touch with imagination and so they continue to feast on old ideas without even noticing their staleness. People no longer partake of the ancient cake of seed, the healthy nourishment of the imagination. Instead, they are content with the bitter, stale meat of human heads (old, stale ideas). No wonder, Stevens tells the readers through a rhetorical question that the table at which the bourgeoise eat reflects their owns shadows in the dishes and provides no nourishment. It is as if the people ate their own reflections, which have come down from past ideas about mankind. Though himself a bourgeoise in his political and economic views, Stevens clearly understood the malady of the quotidian which affected the mechanically-minded people of his age. Their life was bare of fresh imagination and perception of reality. This is why Stevens expresses his disgust for this intellectual starvation of his contemporaries through the horrible image of the feast of human heads.

22. MARTIAL CADENZA

Introduction

"Martial Cadenza" belongs to the group of poems entitled *Parts of a World* and is one of the poems dealing with World War II. Though written in the midst of this great international catastrophe, this poem yet shows Stevens' faith that the "evening star" a symbol of spiritual triumph will ultimately shine on mankind. The poem consists of five stanzas of seven lines each. The meter is imabic pentameter unrhymed.

SUMMARY

Stanza 1

Stevens says that only this evening he saw the evening star quite low in the sky at the beginning of the winter season. He hopes that in the spring this star will crown the whole western

horizon again as if it came back as a sign of life and hope. He makes it clear, however, that this star will not herald the beginning of a faith in a new son (the hidden reference is to Christ, son of God), or a new daughter at a different place. It will not be rather a symbol of life in the present world in which we live, and it will symbolize youth.

Stanza 2

The occasion of the rise of the evening star seemed to be quite sudden and the time seemed to be an eternity in this world; the very street where the poet was standing seemed to have become a world "without time." For something that does not exist has no time, it does not have a being. Nor is it of something that already was before the break-out of the war, before the armies without trumpets or drums and with the commanders mute and the arms on the ground were all fixed in a profound defeat. (The stanza is difficult to paraphrase. What Stevens probably means is that the worldview that existed before the beginning of the world war was quite decadent and had already admitted defeat. In other words, the old faith had gone and the people were now engaged in a suicidal war).

Stanza 3

In this stanza Stevens asks if the emergence of the evening star had anything to do with the world it illuminated when the skies over England, France and Germany were all blank. The star certainly looked different and apart from the blankness that was there in the sky. Nevertheless, it is this that will ultimately maintain the world. It is a star of the present and is itself time. It has got nothing to do with either the past or the future. Yet it is ever-moving, ever-living and existing star and is a symbol of constant fire.

Stanza 4

The star is a symbol of the triumph of mankind which will ultimately emerge from the war. It is not even a symbol in the sense that it stands for something: it is the thing, the spiritual triumph itself. Though the air changes, this star will not change. Only this evening, says Stevens, he sighted the star at the beginning of winter (symbolizing the catastrophe of the war), and he found life and hope in it and time seemed to flash before him with its eternity of time, something that it may symbolize.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Stevens did hot believe in any formal, orthodox religion; nor did he care for the past or the future. Nevertheless, he did a firm

faith in life, the present world. Though the World War came as a depressing period for everyone, yet Stevens did not lose hope that somehow finally the forces of life will triumph over the evil forces of death and destruction. The star, the evening star that he sees in this poem is a symbol of spiritual triumph even in the midst of the catastrophe of war.

This poem also throws light on Stevens' ideas on metaphors and symbols. To apprehend reality without any pre-conceived notions and beliefs is difficult; to express it in a language which is both unambiguous and poetically expressive is no less so. Metaphors and symbols emphasize the transference of identity from one object to another, but in Stevens use of the language, symbols are the right language to emphasize the distinct identity of an object. This is what he means when he writes in this poem: "Not the symbol but that for which the symbol stands,/The vivid thing in the air that never changes,/Though the air change".

The symbolism of light is particularly worth mentioning. As Marie Borroff succinctly remarks, "Like other recurrent images in Stevens, the flash of light has multiple significance. As the highlight seen on an object, it implies the inseparable unity of the perceiving consciousness and the world as perceived, since it appears to each man according to his position relative to the object and the source of light. As the highlight in painting, it is the means by which the artist expresses the three-dimensional reality of the object on a flat surface, and can serve as a focal point of composition. As a phenomenon, the flash of light implies vital motion, either of the object or of the perceiving eye. Finally, the flash of light is an event which, like any other comes to an end. The transience of the moment of imaginative triumph is inevitable in a poet who sees the essential principle of life as change, for whom the vital power of the mind and the vital presence of reality co-exist in a process of perpetual transformation." To achieve all this through a single image or symbol is indeed a commendable job which Stevens performs in almost every poem. The title of this poem, "Martial Cadenza" is therefore quite appropriate, for "cadenza" literally means "an ornamental passage to be played by a soloist." The poem is apparently a cadenza dealing with war ("martial") but in reality it is vitally connected with Stevens' view of reality and his theory of poetry.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. What had this star to do with the world it lit,
   With the blank skies over England, over France
   And above the German camps? It looked apart.
   Yet it is this that shall maintain—Itself
   Is time, apart from any past, apart

From any future, the ever-living and being,
The ever-breathing and moving, the constant fire.

Explanation—This stanza occurs in Wallace Stevens' "Martial Cadenza" one of the poems in *Parts of a World* which was written during World War II. .In the midst of the gloom and despair of the World War II days Stevens did not lose hope for he had an intrinsic faith in life and human imagination which according to him, could rise above all forces of negation, life-denial and destruction. So, in "Martial Cadenza" he sees a star arise above the horizons of the countries, England, France, and Spain, and indicate a new light in the middle of darkness which the World War II was causing. This stanza begins with a relevant question: what had this star to do with the world it seemed to illuminate? The answer is that it looked different from everything else and showed a capacity of self-preservation which war seemed to destroy so much. This star of life and hope was a new being which had got nothing to do with either the past or the future. Yet it seemed to be the principle of life amid the forces of negation and destruction. The star, it is to be noted, is not a symbol of religious regeneration, for Stevens had no faith in traditional religion. It is at best a symbol of the forces of which, Stevens hoped, would somehow assert themselves, since life continues despite change and destruction.

2. The present close, the present realized,
Not the symbol but that for which the symbol stands,
The vivid thing in the air that never changes,
Through the air change. Only this evening I saw it again,
At the beginning of winter, and I walked and talked
Again, and lived and was again, and breathed again
And moved again and flashed again, time flashed again.

Explanation—This is the concluding stanza of Stevens' "Martial Cadenza" a poem in *Parts of a World* which was written and published during World War II. In the midst of despair and destruction that World War II caused, Stevens did not lose faith in the forces of life. He hoped that somehow life would assert itself on the forces of destruction. The star that he sees in the evening is symbolic of this hope for mankind, though it has nothing to do with any religious myth or belief.

For him the present will be fully realized before it closes, and mankind will emerge triumphant from the agonies and horrors of war. The star is therefore not the symbol of anything archetypal or mythological (it is quite unlike the star that the Magi saw on the birth of Christ) but the thing itself, for it represents life and hope. It shows how life never changes despite the change in the atmosphere. Life in flux remains though an individual life may perish. It is in this sense that the star Stevens sees represents the

thing itself and is not to be confused with a poetic metaphor for something remote. As a generator of light, the star in Stevens' symbolism is, as Marie Borroff says, capable of multiple significance "As the highlight seen on an object, it implies the inseperable unity of the perceiving consciousness and the world as perceived. . . As the highlight in painting, it is the means by which the artist expresses the three-dimensional reality of the object on a flat surface, and can serve as a focal point of composition."

This stanza also provides Stevens' views on the nature of his own images. Traditionally, symbols suggest something different from the things which they represent, but in Stevens there is always a search for the most expressive word. Seen thus, the star he sees in this poem is a thing, a reality of human imagination rather than a symbol of anything religious or mythological.

23. OF MODERN POETRY

Introduction

In *Parts of the World* Stevens' poetry comes to be more and more about poetry itself. In "Man and Bottle," which immediately precedes "Of Modern Poetry," Stevens writes,

> The mind is the great poem of winter, the man,
> Who, to find what will suffice,
> Destroys romantic tenements
> Of rose and ice. . . .
> The poem lashes more fiercely than the wind,
> As the mind, to find what will suffice. . . .

That is to say, the buildings of the past, the romantic past, lie in ruins. The modern mind, as well as the modern poet, must discover "what will suffice". "What will suffice" is the question that Stevens faces again in his next poem "Of Modern Poetry."

SUMMARY

The poem consists of three verse paragraphs of varying lengths. The first verse paragraph introduces the subject, while the last which is equally short concludes it. In between, the second verse paragraph, the longest in the poem, outlines Stevens' views of what will suffice for modern poetry.

The poem begins with a distinction between the poetry of the past which expressed ideas and attitudes which were already accepted and poetry which has had to announce its own subject matter. Modern poetry has to deal with the mind when it is in

the process of discovering what will suffice. Earlier, it was not so; everything was set down and the poetry did not have to make this discovery. It only repeated the world view, the vision of man and his universe, which had already been set down in old books. But subsequently, the theatre where the poetic mind is an actor was considerably changed, changed to something else. Its past had been reduced to a souvenir and little more because the view set down in old scripts was no longer relevant.

Modern poetry has, therefore, to be a living poetry, not a poetry simply nursed on the past. It must know the common speech; it must make contact with contemporary people in their normal experience; and it must meet the women of its own time, not the copy-book heroines of old epics and sonnets. What is more, it must think about and express in a language of the modern times the problem that confront the modern people: the problems pertaining to war between man and man, man and his universe, and war between man and his soul. It has to find what will suffice. But in order to do so, it must construct a new stage because the old stage will not do for it. On this new stage, the actor who is unsatisfied with old ideas, old idiom and imagery, must learn to speak words which the mind likes to hear today. And as this actor speaks his meditated words, Louis Martz comments, "they find a growing response in a certain invisible audience, which is not simply us, the readers or listeners, but is first of all the larger, total mind of the poet himself controlling the actor, who is some projected aspect of himself. Then, in the end, that actor and that audience, projected self and larger self, come together in a moment of emotional resolution—for a moment final." In short, the stage in both mind and the poet, each trying to discover a new script. This poet-actor is a metaphysician in the process of "twanging/An instrument", which gives "sounds passing through sudden rightnesses." These sounds contain the mind to the extent they can probe into its depths.

Yet, as the conclusion of the poem emphasizes, this poet-metaphysician's conclusions have to do with gusto rather than with reason. His concern is with the concrete, particular experience such as the skating of a man or the dancing of a woman or of the combing of her hair. It is this kind of a concrete particular that the poet's script in the modern times must discover. It is this which will suffice.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Theme

"Of Modern Poetry" is essentially a poem about poetry and its subject matter is simply what will suffice for a modern poet when the poem has to deal with the "act of the mind." "In the act," as

Susan West on remarks, "is accurate: Stevens' poetry has become increasingly gerundive, mimicking the activity of the mind as it adopts a position, finds it unsatisfactory, and flits to another, then another. If a poem does take a particular stance, Stevens is sure to indicate its ephemeral duration: 'It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.' And this flittingly provides the very rhythms of the long poems." "Of Modern Poetry" not only theorizes about what modern poetry can and ought to do; it also exemplifies the working of a modern poem.

The basic point that Stevens succeeds in establishing is this: New kinds of experiences, feelings and sensations call for new genres, new processes and new concerns. Poems of the past may have been adequate to express the experience of their age, but in today's world they are no more than cherished souvenirs of the past, like historical monuments. Modern poetry is a drama of the mind, defining present reality as best as it can, and in so doing it also creates reality. It is in this sense that the poet is a metaphysician and thinker, and the poem he creates is meditation.

Technique

The technique of "Of Modern Poetry" exemplies the process. Using the metaphor of the theatre, Stevens is able to talk about the modern mind in the same breath that he is talking about his favourite subject: poet, poem, and audience. The metaphor of the theatre is also useful in describing the drama that goes on in the mind as it is engaged in finding out what will suffice. Finally, it also helps the poet to talk of poet as actor, metaphysician, imaginer, perceiver, and audience simultaneously. As a result, the "act of the mind," as Northrop Frye describes it, also becomes a small act of a drama in which "imagination begins, then, is an arresting flow of perceptions without and of impressions within. In that arrest there is born the principle of form or order: the inner violence of the imagination is a "rage for order."

Conclusion

Stevens' conclusjon about what modern poetry should be is, however tentative, as tentative it must be. As Susan Weston remarks, "The strumming guitarist and the improvising actor suggest that for Stevens poetry is less about "what will suffice" than about the "act of the mind" finding it. The climax of the poem occurs when Stevens suggests the possible contentment of the mind:

> Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
> Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
> Beyond which it has no will to rise.

Stevens cannot say *what* the mind wants to hear: he must be content to write *about* a poetry that would express what the mind wants to hear, and to render the satisfaction that *might* ensue. Stevens' is a conditional world indeed."

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. The poem of the mind in the act of finding
   What will suffice. It has not always had
   To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
   Was in the script.
   Then the theatre was changed
   To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

Explanation—These opening lines of Wallace Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry" give his ideas on what modern poetry should be and do and on how it contrasts with the poetry of the past. The poems of modern times have to deal with human mind, human consciousness and discover for themselves what it is that will suffice for the present time. In the past, however, it was not so. Everything was well-set. There was a situation, very much as in a drama, and the scene was set. The poet was guided by traditional concept of poetry and of its function. No wonder, it repeated what was traditionally expected of it. But now things have changed. The scene is now quite different. The past is now to be cherished only as a souvenir, a memento and no more. It cannot guide modern poetry which has to find its own things and, most significant, discover for itself what will suffice. It has to be an intellectual poetry, dealing with the issues which confront the modern mind.

But the poem in the act of mind, as Susan Weston says, has also another meaning in relation to Stevens' own poetry: In the "act of the mind" is accurate: Stevens' poetry has become increasingly gerundive, mimicking the activity of the mind as it adopts a position, finds it unsatisfactory, and flits to another, then another. Thus "Of Modern Poetry" not only theorizes about what it should do but also demonstrates what it ought to do. This is done by the use of the metaphor of the theatre. As Northrop Frye argues, "The 'act of the mind' also becomes a small act of a drama in which imagination begins, then, is an arresting flow of perceptions without and of impressions within."

2. It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
   It has to face the men of the time and to meet
   The women of the time. It has to think about war
   And it has to find what will suffice. It has to
   To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage

Explanation—These lines build on Stevens' ideas on modern poetry expressed in the opening lines of "Of Modern Poetry." The focus in the given lines is on the capacity of poetry to deal with the issues and experiences which confront the modern man. It must use the language that people speak, must depict men and women of today in the variety of experiences they pass through and thought processes which govern their minds. In other words, modern poetry cannot go on repeating what was written in the past about the experiences of the people who are no longer there on the scene. It has to think about war and other burning issues of modern time, and it has to discover what will be adequate for it. It has to reject the old poetic theatre and the language, and to create its own stage. It has to take the present world as a stage and the poet, like an actor, must communicate to the modern audience in a language which the latter understands. The theatrical metaphor is quite appropriate here because the modern poem, as Stevens sees it, is a drama of the mind.

3. . . ., The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds, passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise.

Explanation—Coming towards the end of Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry," these lines express Stevens' concept of modern poetry and what it should do in the modern situation. Since, as Stevens has already said in the poem, modern poetry is an act of the mind, the poet must create a new stage on which he must enact this drama. He has to be an actor who is simultaneously a metaphysician who twangs his poetic instrument and produces the sounds which appropriately express the modern sensibility. His is going to be a poetry which is primarily an act of the mind. It will no longer deal with anything other than what concerns the mind. So it will focus neither on the stuff of traditional poetry which is basically emotional and sentimental, nor on any metaphysical or religious concepts. The metaphysics that will govern this poetry will come from the human mind which expresses its relation with the objects of perception in a language in which the symbol is the thing itself. But, as Susan Weston has noted, "Stevens cannot say what the mind wants to hear; he must be content to write about a poetry that would express what the mind wants to hear, and to render the satisfaction that might ensue. Stevens' is a conditional world indeed." This may not be a flaw in the poem since Stevens' poem, like much modern poetry, is essentially exploratory and so necessarily tentative.

24. EXTRACTS FROM THE ADDRESSES TO THE ACADEMY OF FINE IDEAS

Introduction

"Extracts from the Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" is a satirical poem, mocking the belief in the universality of old ideas in new contexts and upsetting the applecart of what is known as proverbial wisdom. According to Stevens, the old ideas and myths about reality have lost their relevance and their proper place today is in academies and cultural museums not in real life. The pedantic speaker of the beginning of the poem is himself an object of Stevens' ridicule because he expresses the present reality in a language which has lost its proper force of description.

BRIEF SUMMARY

The poem is divided into eight sections of varying length, stanza patterns and even meter. At the beginning the pedantic speaker who addresses the "Academy of Fine Ideas," comes out with his ready-made phrases to describe the relation between man and his universe, but by the mode of description he follows (that is the only one he can choose because he is a prisoner in the claustrophobia of his words) he ends up by inviting ridicule:

> A crinkled paper makes a brilliant sound.
> The wrinkled roses tinkle, the paper ones,
> And the ear is glass, in which the noises pelt,
> The false roses—Compare the silent rose of the sun,
> And rain, the blood-rose living in its smell,
> With this, paper, this dust. That states the point.

One fails to understand what is the point that the speaker has stated, except of course his inability to state it! He continues in this vein, blissfully ignorant of the fact that his language is too obsolete and hackneyed to convey any fresh impression of the reality he is trying to describe:

> The sea is so many written words; the sky
> Is blue, clear, cloudy, high, dark, wide and round;
> The mountains inscribe themselves upon the walls.

The result of his incapacity for perception is presented toward the end of the opening section in which "The false and true are one."

Section 2

The second section demonstrates how the false and true are one when the speaker indulges in a sophistry which proves that good is

the outcome of evil. Exhorting old wise-heads in the academy, he says,

> Be tranquil in your wounds. It is good death
> That puts an end to evil death and dies.
> Be tranquil in your wounds. The placating star
> Shall be the gentler for the death you die
> And the helpless philosophers say still helpful things.
> Plato, the reddened flower, the erotic bird.

Section 3

Section 3 is written in the same vein. But Stevens is his own wise man who worships in his own church:

> The lean cats of the arches of the churches,
> That's the old world. In the new, all men are priests.

"The cats," says Fuchs, "are old, secretive with the mysteries of religion. They have seen too many lean years. This does not prevent Stevens from treating them in his irreverent manner:"

> The preach and are preaching in a land
> To be described. They are preaching in a time
> To be described. Evangelists of what?

Where these lean cats see transparence, Stevens only sees muddle, for

> The lean cats of the arches of the churches
> Bask in the sun in which they feel transparent,
> As if designed by X, the per-noble master.

Their clarity, which is only a confusion, stems from their belief that all this is designed by X, "that unknown missing quantity of deity, that per-noble master, than panjandrum" (a pompous pretender).

Section 4

The next section then describes, in a cliche-ridden language which Stevens has chosen deliberately, the ascription to this X of the creation of all difference and the metaphysical questions of being and becoming:

> If,
> When he looked, the water ran up the air or grew white
> Against the edge of the ice, the abstraction would
> Be broken and winter would be broken and done,
> And being would be being himself again,
> Being, becoming seeing and feeling and self,
> Black water breaking into reality.

Section 5

Section 5 deals with the chaos created by the conflicting ideas about reality. There is fatal lack of unity in the myths that these lean cats of the arches of the churches have tried to create:

> The law of chaos is the law of ideas,
> Of improvisations and seasons of belief.
> Ideas are men. The mass of meaning and
> The mass of men are one Chaos is not
> The mass of meaning. It is three or four
> Ideas, or say, five men or, possibly, six.

The assassins make their seasons of belief. And not one, we know, is magisterial in this making of chaos without his dogma of freedom addressed to his armies. According to James Baird, "It is this clash of freedoms among the demogogues of imagination, the progenitors of chaos, that dominates the range of 'Duch Graves in Buck Country."

Sections 6 and 7

The next two sections, 6 and 7, go on satirizing "systematic thinking" by which Stevens means orthodox, inherited ideas about reality, man's being and his place in this universe, all of which were for Stevens, pure human projections and therefore barriers to the perception of reality:

> What
> One believes is what matters. Ecstatic identities
> Between one's self and the weather and the things
> Of the weather are the belief in one's element,
> The casual reunions, the long-pondered
> Surrenders, the repeated sayings that
> There is nothing more and that it is enough
> To believe in the weather and in the things and men
> Of the weather and in one's self, as part of that
> And nothing more.

Section 8

The last stanza provides the conclusion to this line of thinking in terms of abstractions.

> If earth dissolves
> Its evil after death, it dissolves it while
> We live. Thence come the final chants, the chants
> Of the brooder seeking the acutest end
> Of speech: to pierce the heart's residuum
> And there to find music for a single line,

Equal to memory, one line in which
The vital music formulates the words.

There is thus a necessity to see reality not as a pedant, fed on the stock of his received ideas, would see it, but to experience it directly and without any pre-conceived notions about it, and then finally to express it in a "single line . . . . one line in which/The vital music formulates the words."

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

For Stevens it was of utmost importance to clear away all that acts as a barrier between the subject and the object, the perceiving conscicusness and the perceived reality. Old ideas, simply inherited from the culture are a serious threat to perception of reality because they colour it with old myths. As Marie Borroff puts it, "Indeed, the monuments, all that may be called the authorized versions of cultural history, are an active threat to the mind seeking to relate itself to the world of the present. Even though it is no longer believed in, the ancient myth of the sun-god may interpose itself between us and the sun, and the names and legends of the constellations may similarly obscure the stars. 'The solar chariot is junk' and must be discarded. Language itself, in that it embodies the perceptions of the past in fossilized form, can take on this sinister aspect, hindering rather than furthering the vital activities of consciousness." The past thus becomes an unbearable burden because its perceptions can be suffocating and stultifying. The point of satire in the poem is our respect for the received ideas which are little more than chaos. Freshness of perception can come only when one looks at reality afresh, without any barriers created by cultural heritage.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. It is an artificial world. The rose
Of paper is of the nature of its world.
The sea is so many written words; the sky
Is blue, clear, cloudy, high, dark, wide and round;
The mountains inscribe themselves upon the walls.
And, otherwise, the rainy rose belongs
To naked men, to women naked as rain.

Explanation—These lines are part of the opening section of Stevens' "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Arts." Stevens was bitterly opposed to all stale ideas and myths whether they came from philosophers, religious preachers and the so-called evengelists. These lines, addressed by one of the academician-philosophers to the Academy of Fine Ideas (both the speaker and the academy are of course imaginary), clearly bring out the stale

mode of thinking that, according to Stevens, goes on in pompous gatherings of teachers and philosophers.

The speaker is at pains to establish his thesis that the only reality that pervades this world is to be found in words of the books written by old academicians like himself! The old cliche-proverb, "It is an artificial world", is presented as a truth. The speaker then tries to argue how a paper-rose is the real and natural rose and how the sea is not the huge mass of water but so many words which have been traditionally used to describe it: blue, clear, cloudy, high, dark, wide and round. The . mountains, according to this academician, are no more than the walls of the houses. And, in any case, if the gathering makes the mistake of conceiving a real, rainy rose, they should not do so, since "the rainy rose" belongs to naked men and women, not to academicians.

The lines thus deflate the rhetoric as well as the mode of argument adopted by traditional academicians and philosophers who dismiss the real world as an illusion and describe their own bookish descriptions of it as real.

2. The lean cats of the arches of the churches,
   That's the old world. In the new, all men are priests.

Explanation—These lines from "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" continue Stevens' attack on metaphysicians, epistomologists, scholars and rabbis who labour under the illusion that the reality of the world they speak of is the only reality, although the fact is that they themselves are lost in their stale ideas and fail to see the reality around themselves. Stevens dismisses such thinkers, especially religious preachers, as the "lean cats of the arches of the churches" in the old world. What he means is that these preachers and theologicans, rabbi and metaphysicians, pretend that they know the secrets and mysteries of religion. But in the present world they are rightly ignored and that explains why they are lean: they have in fact seen many lean years. These religious cats are quite ineffectual today not only because people have lost faith in their myths but also because their myths suffer from a fatal lack of unity. Needless to say, Stevens' tone is quite irreverent and his satire annihilating.

3. They preach and are preaching in a land
   To be described. They are preaching in a time
   To be described. Evangelists of what?
   If they could gather there theses into one,
   Collect their thoughts together into one,
   Into a single thought, thus: into a queen,
   An intercessor by innate rapport,
   Or into a dark-blue king, *un roi tonnerre*,
   Whose merely being was his valiance,

Panjandrum and central heart and mind of minds
If they could!

Explanation—In this extract from Stevens' "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," the poet goes on with his satirical attack on religious preachers, philosophers, epistemologists, and academicians. The problem with various theologians and myth-makers is that they are totally incapable of resolving their differences so as to come to a coherent thesis about reality. At present, they continue to preach in a land which does not exist and they preach at a time which is yet to be described! They pretend to be evangelists, but what kind of evangelism can they bring about in the world when there is hardly any unity in the myths they preach? It would be better, perhaps, says Stevens satirically, if they could all combine their disparate ideas into a coherent thesis about the world and reality, or at least invent a commonly acceptable myth about a beautiful queen or a valiant king so that there could still be some rapport between their myths and the actual world. But as the imaginary past tense of these lines shows, these preachers cannot harmonize their divergent theses into one; nor can they understand the world and reality which they boast of knowing better than others. Under the circumstances these metaphysicians remain pompous and mysterious panjandrums (this word, according to the OED means a "nonsense formation . . . ." Hence a mock title for a myste- rious or exalted personate; a local magnate of great airs; a pompous pretender).

4. Chaos is not
The mass of meaning. It is three or four
Ideas or, say, five men, or possibly six.
In the end, these philosophic assassins pull
Revolvers and shoot each other.

Explanation—This extract from "The Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" shows Stevens' attitude towards old inherited ideas which, according to him, are a bane of this world and a barrier to our understanding and perception of reality. It is futile to look for any meaning out of the chaos of ideas that prevails. What is more, these ideas are so conflicting and contradictory that one easily destroys the other. These philosophic assassins pull out their revolvers and kill each other and are responsible for creating the chaos that we see around. Such ideas, as Marie Borroff comments, "are a garbage dump, a junk shop, a theatre beaten in by a tempest. . . . it is the second-rate statuary on savings banks. . . the vested interest of the academies and the museums."

25. NO POSSUM, NO SOP, NO TATERS

Introduction

In "The Snow Man" Stevens emphasizes the need to have a mind of winter to understand and express the stark reality of winter without any colouring from religion or theory of good. But sometime the reality may simply become unbearable, as it did during the World War, and one may simply feel disenchanted with the world. Such is the theme of Stevens' "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" which was written during the World War.

CRITICAL SUMMARY

The poem begins by depicting a landscape of total desolation. The old sun, the source of life and energy is absent as if he has gone to sleep. The fields around are covered with snow and are entirely frozen. The leav es of the trees are dry, and in short, an atmosphere of evil seems to dominate the earth. In this bleak air, the broken stalks seem to represent the broken humanity. They have arms without hands, trunks without legs and heads. The heads, broken and severed, utter an involuntary cry. Snow falls like eye-sight on the earth, the leaves hop when the ground is scrapped. It is deep and cold January. The sky is hard and the stalks are covered with ice, though they are firmly rooted. It is in such a solitude that an occasional cry, a syllable, flits and begins to intone the emptiness that prevails in the surroundings, and thus becomes the most savage and meaningless sound of a cruel winter. It is here in this predominance of the bad over the good that one can see the stark reality of good. The ugly here appears to be the only beautiful thing. In this atmosphere of desolate whiteness, the crow looks rusty as he rises up, and the only bright thing is the malice in his eyes. One would like to join him there for company, in the midst of this disolation, but only at a distance, on another tree and not the same.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Written in the midst of World War II, "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" is a poem of great disenchantment. The barren, baré and nightmarish landscape that it depicts is an objective correlative for the sense of evil which has begun to dominate the world and on which any theory or new sense of good must rest. Man has lost his sustenance—this is what the title indicates—and he is part of the broken, crippled humanity, having "arms without hands," "trunks without legs" or without "heads." Humanity has lost its tongue so that the only sound is an involuntary cry; eye-sight has been blinded by the snow falling to earth. The only living creature in this nightmarish world is the "rusty crow," with his eyes full of malice. H

ing no other company, one cannot help but join this representative of creation, bright in its malice. But the ultimate vision is not negative. As Daniel Fuchs remarks, "It is the recognition of the evil aspect of existence which is the basic premise of the knowledge of good. A morality which is to be true for us must be one which confronts the blackness which our fantasies, which our realities, engender. We must deal with the conspicious presence of evil. Stevens propounds a morality which begins by confronting the fact of evil, and his sense of beauty reflects it. If evil is to be the first admission of good, ugliness will be seen to have a special beauty."

A Note of affirmation is also found in the poet's conquest of desolation. Even as it laments the failure of imagination and the failure of perception in the sun, it expresses what can be called a song of desolation. Even if the poet chooses to join the ugly crow, it will be on a distant tree, not the same.

Imagery

The syntax and the imagery of the poem are consistent with the desolation it depicts. The nightmarish vision of a nightmarish world is presented through the metamorphosis of stalks into limbs of broken humanity: —"

> In this bleak air the broken stalks
> Have arms without hands. They have trunks
> Without legs or, for that, without heads.
> They have heads in which a captive cry
> Is merely the moving of a tongue.

Short sentences describing this utter desolation emphasize the absence of any picturesqueness. The lack of "possum, sop, and taters" with a thrice repeated "No" resembles the "savagest hollow of winter-sound." The presence of the black crow over the scattered limbs of broken humanity is terrible in its imagistic implications. If desolation could ever find a voice, it has found in Stevens' cryptic, bare and terrible imagery.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. He is not here, the old sun,
   As absent as if we were asleep.

   The field is frozen. The leaves are dry.
   Bad is final in this light.

   In this bleak air the broken stalks
   Have arms without hands. They have trunks
   Without legs or, for that, without heads.

Explanation—The despair and desolation that pervaded during the period of the World War II could not but affect the sensitive

mind of a poet. Stevens too was no exception and these lines taken from his "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" aptly bring out his feeling of desolation during this period. The landscape these lines describe is a landscape of total desolation in the cold winter of January. The sun seems to have disappeared and so there is neither heat nor light. During the day, an atmosphere of darkness prevails. The landscape is frozen, and the leaves of the trees are dry. It seems that evil has finally triumphed over the forces of good. In this bleak and unwholesome atmosphere, one does not see plants but only their stalks, bare of leaves and even twings. They look like human trunks without legs and without heads. The nightmarish landscape is an appropriate correlative for the atmosphere of evil and darkness that governed the human world, and these lines bring this fact out. The absence of any metaphoric framework and the cryptic short sentences (look how two small lines of verse contain as many as three sentences in the second couplet) emphasize the sterility, desolation and destruction.

2. It is deep January. The sky is hard.
The stalks are firmly rooted in ice.

It is in this solitude, a syllable,
Out of these gawky flitterings,
Intones its single emptiness,
The savagest hollow of winter-sound

Explanation—These lines from Stevens' "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" continue the description of the nightmarish atmosphere created by World War II (the poem was written during this period). The utter coldness of January prevails in the whole landscape. The sky is hard and the stalks of the broken plants (which represent broken and defeated humanity) are half-covered in snow. There is complete solitudes verging on desolation. Occasionally, there is a strange ugly cry which breaks the stillness of this atmosphere and pierces through the hollow of the winter sound. The landscape described here is a fitting objective correlative for the desolation caused by World War II. In this bleak, winter whiteness, when the glitter of the January sun on snow is the only thing to be encountered, there is no hope for mankind. Even the words seem frozen and the cryptic short sentences emphasize the desolation by focusing attention on the bare bleak landscape.

3. It is here, in this bad, that we reach
The last purity of the knowledge of good.

The crow looks rusty as he rises up.
Bright is the malice in his eye...

One joins him there for company,
But at a distance, in another tree.

Explanation—These concluding lines of Stevens' "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" sum up the poet's views on the desolation and destruction caused by World War II. Having described the nightmarish atmosphere of evil, darkness and cold winter, Stevens now comes towards the affirmation of the poem in these lines. The landscape described thus far is real and terrible, and it hardly leaves any room for hope. Yet Stevens is an optimist who believes that somehow forces of rightness and life will prevail over the forces of evil and desolation. What is more, it is necessary, he argues, that any idea of good must take into account the existence of evil. It is out of evil that some good will finally emerge. As an example, he presents the image of a crow, with malice in its eyes. This ominous bird is the only living thing in the atmosphere of destruction, and the only brightness is the malice that shines from its eyes. Yet, being a symbol of life, the crow gives hope and one would like to join him, though on another tree, at a distance. The conclusion, of the poem is therefore affirmative. As Daniel Fuchs remarks, "It is the recognition of the evil aspect of existence which is the basic premise of the knowledge of good. A morality which is to be true for us must be one which confronts the blackness which our fantasies, which our realities, engender. Stevens propounds a morality which begins by confronting the fact of evil, and his sense of beauty reflects it. If evil is to be the first admission of good, ugliness will be seen to have a special beauty."

26. MAN CARRYING THING

Introduction

"Man Carrying Thing" figures with other poems published under the title *Transport to Summer*. Though the poem begins with a vivid picture in words, the picture is a peg to hang the problem of identity and perception of reality which are recurrent themes in Stevens' mature poetry.

SUMMARY

A small lyric of just fourteen lines, "Man Carrying Thing" is divided into seven short stanzas of two lines each without rhyme. The poem begins with a general statement about what poetry should do and what it should resist:

> The poem must resist the intelligence
> Almost successfully

The rest of the poem, except the concluding two lines, proves this point by means of an illustration: the problem about the identity

of a "man carrying a thing". A brune, dark figure in winter evening resists identity. The thing that this man carries resists the most necessary identification that needs to be made by the senses of the perceiver. These two, or just one (not man and the thing he carries, but "man carrying thing are secondary aspects of perception (since they are the parts not quite easily perceived, because they cannot lead to the apprehension of the whole. These are, instead, uncertain, unidentifiable particles of a bigger and more solid whole, something which is undoubtedly primary. Analogically, perception of the man carrying thing is like looking for the reality underlying the snow, or the idea of snow, after one has seen a hundred or so flakes of snow out of a storm during a whole winter night). So, just as these flakes of snow are secondary parts of the more tangible snow or its idea, the man carrying thing is just a part and not whole of the perception. We must endure our thoughts all night, waiting for the proper apprehension of the idea underlying the picture of a man carrying a thing.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

"Man Carrying Thing" is a baffling poem since it deals with Stevens' abstract ideas about the perception of reality. The problem of perception is made clear by this analogy. As perception of a three-dimensional thing depends on several factors,—the degree and quantity of light, the angle of vision from which it is seen, the state of mind in which one perceives it, and even the images and ideas from that part of the perceiver's consciousness—it is not easy to identify even such a small phenomenon as a man carrying a thing on a winter evening. The two, man and the thing, have several identities, but when the two are seen together, their identities create a complex single identity. The dusky night and the cold of winter add their own share to the difficulty of perception. As a result, what the viewer sees is only part of the whole, complex identity of anything. To arrive as a clear perception of anything, therefore, it is necessary that "we endure our thoughts all night, until/The bright obvious stands motionless in cold."

Commeting on this kind of complexity in Stevens' views on perception of reality, Sister M. Bernetta Quinn observes, "A primary aspect of metamorphosis in Stevens is the effect of the senses on extra-mental reality. No one sees quite the same rose as anyone else does; there is, in fact, a semantics of perception, wherein sense 'is like a flow of meaning with no speech/And of as many meanings as of men.' . . . . This variety of synecdoche is a consequence of the selection made by the senses from the ineffably multiple phenomena comprising the flux which overwhelms human consciousness from instant to instant."

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

"Man Carrying Thing" is an illustration of Stevens' theory of perception of reality. The perception of a thing depends on several things: the degree of light, the angle from which it is seen and the state of mind of the perceiver. When Stevens says at the beginning that the poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully, he is not asking a poet to give a free rein to his emotions or imagination; instead, he argues that the intelligence which looks at things from a fixed point of view, usually found in books or traditional habits of thought, must be successfully resisted. As an illustration of his theory he cites the example of a brune figure in winter which resists an easy identification. It is not only the brune figure but also the thing that he carries cannot be easily described, even identified. For example, are these to be taken as two separate things, a person and the thing he is carrying, or just one as the title suggests? Moreover, both are but parts, and therefore secondary, of an obvious whole whose identity defies recognition. They are like the particles, say, flakes of snow, which together create a solid but different reality. A whole is not merely a sum of its parts, but more than that. Analogically, therefore, trying to define the identity of a man carrying a thing is to attempt to define the reality of the snow on the basis of the flakes or particles which make it. Needless to say, this perception cannot grasp or apprehend the whole. Proper understanding of the reality of any object requires examination of it from several different perspectives and of course with patience, which is symbolized through the example of someone enduring a storm all night to discover the reality of the storm. Even that would not give a complete knowledge of reality because in this world of change objects do not stand still but keep on changing, metamorphosing themselves. To return to the illustration of the "man carrying thing": the man is in motion, and so it is difficult to define his identity in a state of flux. It is this what the poem of today must attempt to do, and it is something which they cannot do with a monocular intelligence which thinks of reality as something given and fixed.

27. THE HOUSE WAS QUIET AND THE WORLD WAS CALM

Introduction

"The central concern of Stevens' poetry," says J.V. Cunningham, "is a concern to be at peace with his surroundings, with this world, and with himself. He requires for this an experience of the togetherness of himself and Nature, an interpenetration of himself and his environment, along with some intuition of permanence in

the experience of absoluteness, though this be illusory and transitory, something to satisfy the deeply ingrained longings of his religious feeling." It is the kind of harmony between the man and his world that he emphasizes in "The Snow Man" where the perceiver of the wintry landscape is urged to have a "mind of winter": "Sunday Morning" emphasizes a similar need to accept and identify oneself with the sunny world in a different manner. "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" shows a similar identification between the persona and the surroundings.

SUMMARY

The persona this time is a reader, leaning over his book during a summer night. The identification achieved is on three levels: between the man and the book, between the book and the summer, and by implication between the man and the summer night. The setting is rather ordinary, and there is nothing exotic about it.

The house was quiet and the world around was calm in its summer pleasantness. As the reader was busy reading his book, he became one with it. The pleasant summer night seemed to him like the living and conscious spirit of the book he was reading. There was so much of an identification that the words he uttered (as he read the book) were spoken as if there were no book; instead, all that one could see was the reader leaning over the pages of his book. His involvement in reading was so complete that he wanted to lean more and more on his book as he read it. The book in fact had become the truth for him, the truth that was within him. Similarly, so complete was his identification with the summer night that the latter seemed to echo the perfection of his thought. Even the quietness that pervaded the study as well as the surroundings seemed to have become part of the meaning as well as of the mind of the reader. There was no ambivalence or equivocation: the truth in this calm atmosphere seemed to have become one, both with the reader and the surroundings. And it was also the truth of the book. It seemed as though truth had become not only the mind of the reader and the book but also the whole surrounding.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The central subject of the poem is the complete synthesis between man, his consciousness and the world in which he lives. There is a total identification between the reader and the book on the one hand, and between these two and the summer night. The sense of harmony was so complete that as in Yeats' "Among School Children" it is difficult "to know the dancer from the dance," here it is difficult to know the reader from the book and both of them from the summer atmosphere at night. Though such a harmony is rare in

life, yet the harmony that the poem expresses is a constant need, not only for the poet but for all of us.

Commenting on the fusion of the theme of harmony and the form that Stevens has given to this poem, J.V. Cunningham observes: "It is a short poem in couplets entitled 'The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm.' There is no diffle-dee-dee here. The setting is ordinary, not exotic. It is about a man reading alone, late at night. The phrasing is exact and almost unnoticeable. The style is bare, less rich than "Sunday Morning,' but with this advantage over that poem, that none of its effect is drawn from forbidden sources, from what is rejected. The meter is a loosened iambic pentameter, but loosened firmly and as a matter of course, almost as if it were speech becoming meter rather than meter violated." In other words, the experience of harmony between man and his surroundings that this poem describes is also found in the harmony between the experience embodied and the form of this poem. In this connection, Sister M. Bernetta Quinn also observes, "Still one more illustration of the fluidity of essence is the poem 'The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm, 'in which 'The Reader became the book; and summer night/Was like the conscious being of the book,' a progression which identifies the reader with the summer night. Again, Stevens surprises us by using the indicative where accepted grammar would demand the subjunctive, as if to obliterate the distinction between wish and fulfilment; the scholar hears the words of the book spoken 'as if there was no book.' The poet goes on to say that truth itself is summer, the night, the reader—a blending of essences reminiscent of Eliot's 'music heard so deeply that you the music' in the *Quartets*.

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Throughout his poetic musings Stevens was concerned with the apprehension of reality, not through the spectacles provided by old ideas which he dismissed as "lean cats of the arches of the churches" but through a close identification of the self with the world. Such an identification provided the order in "The Idea of Order at Key West" because the music of the girl and of the sea become one. "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" takes up this theme once again and provides a different, more homely and common place analogy.

The persona of this poem is a reader thoroughly absorbed in reading a book. An atmosphere of complete calm and quiet pervades the house where he is engaged in reading. As he bent over the book, the reader and the book no longer seemed two separate identities but seemed to have combined to make one whole. What is more, the pleasant atmosphere of the summer night had also become part of the reader as well as the book. As he read, he spoke the

words but the identification between the two was so complete, that the words seemed to come from him rather than from the book. The only point of difference one could notice was only the momentary leaning of the reader over the book. Extending the point of identification, Stevens says that the book has become the truth for this reader. The summer night seemed to him to be a perfect night because of the harmony between the reader and the book on the one hand, and between both of these and the summer night. Even the calm of the surroundings had become a part of the meaning that the reader found in the book. He had reached a perfect state of involvement in and identification with his surroundings that there was no meaning for him apart from what he found within his consciousness, within the book, and within the world of which he was part. The poem thus affirms Stevens' ideal of an identification between man and his world.

28. THE PRESIDENT ORDERS THE BEE TO BE

Introduction

"The President Orders the Bee to Be" is the second poem in the "It Must Change" section of Stevens' most ambitious poem: *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. *Notes* contains Stevens, ideas on his theory and practice of poetry. According to Stevens, modern poetry must have three clear attributes: it must be abstract, in that it should not deal with the simple factual reality but distil the substance of experience from the experienced reality; secondly it must take care of the change which is a part of the natural process, for poetry cannot remain tied to the distant and obsolete past; thirdly, the supreme fiction must give pleasure. "The President Orders the Bee to Be" is an ironical interplay to the dead-weight of the past and the change which is the necessitry of poetry as well as of life.

SUMMARY

This poem, like its preceding poem in the "It Must Change" section of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* is devoted to the celebration of the advent of spring. The poem builds an antithesis between the dogmatic President, perhaps a metaphysician or a political theorist, and the bees who came to procreate in the spring season. The President, obsessed with his ideas about reality and imortality, orders the bee to be immortal. But can the bee accept it and do so? Does it take up an immortal, inexhaustible being and rise above the loftiest antagonist when it is the time of youth for it?

Why should the bee be concerned with recapturing a lost cliche a claptrap and try to blow on a horn which is no longer than a bottomless trophy? Why should this new hornsman blow the old horn which has lost all relevance now? The questions are clearly rhetorical, and the poet-persona's answer is an emphatic "No".

The President is living in the comforts of his old house, surrounded by all the traditions of the old. Like the metaphysicians whom Stevens ridiculus in many of his poems, this President is also busy getting the curtains of his house adjusted, so that they suit his metaphysical theories about being. The banners of the nation, as conceived by such metaphysicians, flutter on the flag-poles in a red-blue dazzle and beat the ropes.

But why should the bee listen to the President and his shabby notions of immortality? The bee cannot exist in this kind of artificially wrought concepts of immortality. Why should there be a question of returning to thoughts of being and immortality when the bee is busy in the process of becoming, which is also the process of change that governs the world? Spring is not a sleep but an awakening. The warmth that it brings is for lovers who consumate their love. They begin it and not resume it (for one resumes something that one had already taken up and momentarily abandoned). The bee is a new self, a new-come bee in the process of change. Why should it then listen to the President and not celebrate its own renewing in the month of spring?

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Change is an important element in Stevens' theory of reality and imagination, as well as in his theory of poetry. That which is old is not necessarily good. But certainly that which is fixed and static cannot be true, because reality is always in a state of flux: is keeps on changing. The supreme fiction must take care of this fact and must, therefore, change. The idea is presented through the antithesis between the fixed, static metaphysician, called President, and the bee which eludes any fixation; for the bee not only keeps buzzing and singing but also re-creating itself in the months of spring. Why and how can it accept the burden of the past theories which are fixed and static? As Clauco Cambon observes, "The President 'ordains the bee to be/Immortal' because instead of wanting change he would like to fix reality, to make it absolutely stable and secure; but the bee cannot exist in the artificial immortality. Neither decreed 'immortality' nor sheer repetition, but renewal, is the highest good, to be had only from love, which makes new every seasonal return by redeeming it from mechanical cycle. . . . Every love is, then, a new beginning; and love is nature in the finest sense, nature ever ready to mock the pretentious apparatus

of human authority, politics, or construction. The bee is also a discreet Sophoclean symbol of poetry, which eludes any command and repetition, because it lives in creative metamorphosis."

The poem thus questions the validity of the metaphysical or abstract theories that emphasize fixation and stability which are often constructions of the past and impositions on the present state of flux. Commenting on this aspect, Harold Bloom writes, "The booming of the returning bees, 'as if they had never gone,' defies our sense of things past, and comically defies also the pronunciamentoes by which we would invest nature with our shabby notions of immortality. Against our unimaginative denial of the reality of change, the booming of the bees asserts a beginning, nor a resuming. . . . Without this bee that never settles, without its generations that follow in their universe, the land we inhabit 'would be geography of the dead,' to cite *Somnambulisma*, one of the Stevens' most crucial shorter poems. Such a geography of the dead is exemplified in Section III of *It Must Change* by the great statute of the General Du Puy. This noble rider was 'an inhuman bronze,' a monument to the past so rigid as to divest the past of all reality."

The President in this poem is thus clearly an archaism who would have the poets to remark reality according to his dictates. But why should there be a question of returning, when each spring is a new beginning; when the bee is a new become, a being-a-new? Interestingly as Vendler has pointed out, there is a pun on the word be/bee. The former is an abstract idea and implies a certain fixed status, a kind of dead and lifeless stasis; the bee, on the other hand, is forever moving, buzzing, re-creating and yet defying any clear fixation. As symbol of poetry, it shows the need for change; for present poetry or supreme fiction that Stevens theorizes about must include the feature of change which characterizes reality.

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

The poem begins with the President (who stands for an old metaphysician, or a modern politician-statesman who wants reality to be fixed according to his old notions about it). The President orders the bee to be immortal so that it becomes fixed and abstract. The President of course pompously and formally ordains the bee to be. But will or can the bee oblige his dogmatic fixations about immortality which, because of the pun on the word *be/bee* seem so artificial? The body which is in a state of flux will not take up its heavy wing and rise in order to become something immortal or inexhaustible. Being in spring, the bee must drone in the green pastures and on flowers and be part of the change that spring has brought about.

There is certainly no compulsion for the bee to recapture a lost and therefore obsolete claptrap and to find an old horn and buzz a new tune in it. The old horn has become a trophy of the past and there is no need for this new hornsman to blow an old horn. In other words, the past is already dead and gone and one cannot inhabit the present world of change with static things of the past. The bee exists in time and space and is subject to change. How can anyone order it to run after a past-dictated formulation of immortality? The bee is thus the antithesis of the President with his old and outdated notions of fixed ideas on existence and immortality.

The two tercetis that follow describe the smug and old-fashioned surroundings of the President, an old metaphysician, like the metaphysician in Stevens' "Metaphors of a Magnifico," or in "The Curtains in the House of a Metaphysician." The President seated at his dining table and eating apples while his bare-footed servants (the setting is a reminder of the past of a magnifico), try to adjust the curtains in the house according to his orders, symbolizes a past theoretician or metaphysician who must fix everything to a metaphysical "t". He must have the banners fluttering on fixed flag-poles in a red-blue dazzle. These banners can be raised or lowered with a rope. These are the symbols for his ideas of fixations in which he still glories.

But how can the bee listen to the President who is a kind of archaism in the present world of change. The bee cannot follow his ideas on existence and immortality. For the bee, the existence consists in present change and movement, love-making and pro-creating when the spring months are so auspicious for such things. In any case, the bee is not to resume something (resumption on implies taking something again) because it is engaged in a renewal and an awakening. Why should it be lost in the memories of the past? It is because of its involvement in the process of change that the bee becomes a new-bee, or a new-come bee as Stevens describes it. These concluding lines of the poem thus pose a question to metaphysicians about the irrelevance of their ideas borrowed from the past. Simultaneously, they celebrate the process of becoming in a world of flux. The poem thus moves from vague theorizing about fixed and artificial immortality to the becoming that is involved in a state of flux. This is also Stevens' theory about the supreme fiction which must change and not be burdened with inherited theories about being.

29. THE ULTIMATE POEM IS ABSTRACT

Introduction

"The Ultimate Poem is Abstract" belongs to the *Auroras of Autumn* group of poems and, like many of his poems such as "Of Modern Poetry", "Poetry is a Destructive Force," "Poems of Our Climate," and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," deals with Stevens' theory of poetry and his ideas on the interaction between imagination and reality. In "Effect of Analogy," Stevens remarks that "The poet is constantly concerned with two theories" of poetry. In the first, the imagination is recognized as the ultimate power which enables the poet to put reality to his uses. This kind of poetry is "marginal," since it is one-sided. The second kind of poetry which Stevens describes as central "relates to the imagination as a power within to have such insights into reality as will make it possible for him to be sufficient as a poet in the very center of consciousness." "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract" is a versified statement of this theory. For it emphasizes the need to be in the centre of both imagination and reality.

SUMMARY

The poem begins by questioning the acceptance of pre-conceived notions and projections of reality. What is the problem that confronts this world? The orthodox speaker on "This Beautiful World of Ours" (this is the old theme of the discourses of many preachers and orators, something which Stevens ridicules here by presenting it ironically) has his set answer. He hesitates, clears his throat and says that this planet '(the earth) is beautiful and it is ripe, red and right. He has his own answer to give why it is so (the implication is that the upholder of such a viewpoint has some orthodox belief or mythology to support him). But Stevens finds fault with the question itself: "The particular question—here/The particular answer to the particular question/Is not in point—the question is in point."

If the day writhes, if there is any suffering or evil in the present world, it is not a revelation. For it does not put an end to questions about why. The answer given or "revealed" is only one of the categories. So said, this calm place undergoes a change. We knew that it was not so blue (so imaginative). To the imagination there must be no questions. It is only intellect which tries to avoid the right questions and answers about the problem of reality by trying to explain them away instead of experiencing them directly, something which imagination does. It is not an intelligence in which we recognize the change, the flux. This change, this life and world in a state of flux, is something that we can find everywhere in space at once and find it communicative. Intellect after all takes us only to the edge of the

world; reality, however, lies at the centre. A complete apprehension of reality of the world and life will come when one tries to reach the "middle" and enjoy it, not by touching the edge. This is something which the ultimate poem can do by trying to abstract the idea from the experience which goes on changing in a changing world.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The word "abstract" in the title has to be understood in the sense in which Stevens liked to use it. As Northrop Frye says, "By abstract Stevens apparently means artificial in its proper sense, something constructed rather than generalized. In such a passage as this we can see the myth forming out of "repetition' as the individual soldier becomes the unknown soldier, and the unknown soldier the Adonis or continuously martyred god." Stevens believed in a supreme fiction, which he thought must be abstract, but this fiction was to be based not on any accepted worldview but by a fresh understanding of the reality bare of projections. If a poem is to be abstract, an artifact, it must begin by exploring reality individually and anew, not by accepting religious or philosophical ideas inherited from the past. Commenting on this aspect of Stevens' theory of poetry, Harold Bloom writes, "The possible poet has the power to abstract or withdraw himself from outworn conceptualizations of reality, and to live in the world, yet outside the existing conceptions of it, and he can do this only by fabricating his fictions. When these fictions become supreme,...it is because the abstracted reality has been married to the possible sublimities of the imagination." To comment on the reality, one has to be in the centre of it and yet perceive this reality through imagination. Old answers and old questions about reality will not do; modern poetry, as modern philosophy, must try to understand reality afresh not by simply theorizing about it, but by directly apprehending it through the imagination. In this respect, this poem throws light on Stevens' concern with what he regarded as abstract poetry much in the same way that one talks of abstract painting.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. This day writhes with what? The lecturer
   On This Beautiful World of Ours composes himself
   And hems the planet rose and haws it ripe,

   And red, and right. The particular question--here
   The particular answer to the particular question
   Is not in point—the question is in point.

Explanation—These opening lines of Stevens' "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract" illustrate his ideas on the nature of poetry and also his worldview. Beginning with a traditional question

which a traditional metaphysician or academician tries to answer—This day writhes with what?—Stevens laughs at the very staleness of the question and the approach adopted by the "lecturer" who is one of the many figures of ridicule in Stevens' poems. Fed on the bookish ideas about reality, the "lecturer" is almost always able to provide a hackneyed answer to this question by building a theory of good and evil about this beautiful world of ours. Stevens finds fault not with the answer, which is surely inadequate, but basically with the question. One does not get right answers by asking wrong kind of questions. So if the reality of the world eludes this "lecturer" it is simply because he has not learnt to ask the right kind of questions. The ultimate poem will not deal with such questions and such stale answers. It will be abstract because it will try to distil or abstract the theory out of the very core of reality and not from books or traditional modes of thought and faith.

2. It would be enough
If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
In This Beautiful World of Ours and not as now,

Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,
And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy.

Explanation—These concluding lines of Stevens' "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract" sum up his idea on the need for direct and fresh apprehension of reality. This approach, as usual in Stevens, involves of course a skilful use of imagination. Perhaps one could approach reality if one were at the centre of things and in a fixed state in "this beautiful world of ours" (the phrase is traditional and used in a satiric vein here). Of course the world is beautiful, but to know its beauty and enjoy it, one has to be at the centre of things and not merely at the margin. In our present condition perhaps, it is enough to enjoy the world. If at all one has to theorize about it, one must be at the centre of the reality and take into account the fact that reality is in a state of flux.

30. OLD LUTHERAN BELLS AT HOME

Introduction

In "The Old Lutheran Bells at Home," published in *Auroras of Autumn*, Wallace Stevens again returns to the theme he had earlier treated in "Ploughing on Sunday," "Sunday Morning," and "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman." The theme is one of religious faith and ritual, and as usual in Stevens, of the old values still persisting in the twentieth century despite their anachronism and irrelevance.

SUMMARY

The old Lutheran bells ringing in modern and distant Pennsylavania are first identified with the voices of the pastors calling young men to the church in the names of saints of ancient or medieval times: St. Paul, halo-John, and other holy and learned men, along with great members of choir, "propounders of hymns, trumpeters, Jerone and the scrupulous Francis and Jerome, and, of course (with a typical Stevens' irony), Sunday women, the nurses of the spirit's innocence.

The bells of Lutherans are the voices of the pastors calling people to the way of religion and faith since the road to heaven is rough and paved with several barriers. Deep in the sound of these voices, there is the distant voice of Martin Luther, who like Calvin, emphasized man's sinfulness and his entire dependence on God's grace. Similarly, one can visualize through the sound of these bells dark John looking outward through his mystic appearance. Each sexton (a church employee who takes care of the building of the church and of digging of graves) has his own religious sect, but the bells have none. The bells are rather reminiscent of the mythological shepherd calling generations of sheep, as if they heard the sound of these bells in the sleep and involuntarily responded to them.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Agnostic as Stevens was, he did not have much love for orthodox Christianity. For him whatever paradise is there exists on the earth and it is this reality of which everyone should be aware. This is why he could not believe in an old faith with its values and interpretations of reality which may have been valid at one time and place but which have nonetheless lost their relevance as guides to reality in the modern times. What is more, to emphasize man's sinfulness and to talk of only afterlife at the expense of this life was something unacceptable to Stevens. It was, in his opinion, a sheer burden of inheritance and a tyranny to oppress a twentieth century man living in Pennsylvania with the rite of faith that Martin Luther propounded in Europe several centuries ago. This is also the main theme in "Sunday Morning" and "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman." In "Ploughing on Sunday" Stevens had already gone to the other extreme by emphasizing how one can enjoy the beauty of nature, rather than prayer in a chapel, on a fine Sunday Morning! The tone becomes quite irreverant toward the end of "The Old Lutheran Bells at Home," when Stevens writes,

> These are the voices of the pastors calling
> And calling like the long echoes in long sleep,
> Generations of shepherds to generation of sheep.

Each person has to discover reality anew according to his own imagination, time, and place; this is why each "sexton has his sect." James Baird appropriately comments on Stevens' argument in this poem in the following words: "What shall be said? That Martin Luther propounded in the deep past the rite of faith which was commanded of a young man in Pennsylvania? That he knew no priest of the essential phase, the imagination's Latin, *a hawk of life*? The poem ends in a summary in the highest of the freedom in that phrase, 'Each truth is a sect. ... kick their feet." Stevens approaches the last inspection of St. Armorer's church. His chapel is his truth, his sect; though no bells ring its praise. The sextons of the word ring the bells of all 'stentor Martins' who advance their separate truths as the final truths of the sheep."

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. These are the voices of the pastors calling
In the names of St. Paul and of the halo-John
And of other holy and learned men, among them
Great cloisters, propounders of hymns, trumpeteers,
Jerome and the scrupulous Francis and Sunday women,
The nurse of the spirit's innocence.

Explanation—These opening lines of Stevens' "Old Lutheran Bells at Home" belong to the section *The Auroras of Autumn* but have the same deflating attitude towards religion that some of his early poems such as "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" show. Stevens' tone is as usual irreverant. The Old Lutheran bells ringing in a church in modern Pennsylvania seem to Stevens to be a contradiction in terms. Since they remind the modern Americans of sinfulness from the point of view of ancient or medieval saints, in whose name the church continues to preach Christianity, Stevens had no use for them. These lines, therefore, are in a way reported lines, for they do not express Stevens' opinion but simply the opinion of the people who listen to the call of these bells. To Stevens they sound no more than the voices of pastors who remind the people of their sins as Luther did during the days of Reformation in Europe! So identifying these bells with the voices of these old churchmen, pastors, St. Paul, the halo-John, other holy men and women, choristers, and proponents of traditional religious hymns, such as Jerome and Francis, Stevens says that they will appeal only to old Sunday churchgoers, usually women, who claim to be the nurses' of the spirit's innocence.

2. These are the voices of the pastors calling
And calling like the long echoes in long sleep,
Generations of shepherds to generations of sheep.

Each truth is a sect though no bells ring for it.
And the bells belong to the sextons, after all,
As they jangle and dangle and kick their feet.

Explanation—These concluding lines of "The Old Lutheran Bells at Home" provide Stevens' own satiric view on the sinfulness of man which Luther and saints of Christianity reminded man of in medieval Europe. For Stevens they have no use, especially in modern America. Today these bells of the church have lost all significance. They seem to come as echoes from a distant dream that one once saw during sleep. Though these voices keep on calling people sheep who need the guidance of the shepherd (the terms are deliberately biblical!) their truth has no value today. Each truth is a sect of its own kind, and it needs no church bells to announce it. These bells belong to just one sect, or just one kind of people; as for others, they only jangle and dangle and mean no more. For each person has to discover the reality anew according to his own imagination. For Stevens, his own truth is his chapel and sect, though no bells ring to sing its praise.

31. TO AN OLD PHILOSOPHER OF ROME

Introduction

"To an Old Philosopher of Rome" (1952) is Wallace Stevens' tribute to George Santayana. It is not only one of the finest poems in his last collection, *The Rock*, but also an elegy of the first magnitude. The subject of this commemorative poem is the death of George Santayana, a man Stevens knew but only distantly, and its setting is a city, Rome, which Stevens never visited in his life. But both knew each other. During his stay in Harvard, Santayana took great interest in Stevens' poetry when he had just begun publishing it in the *Harvard Advocate*, though Stevens did not attend anyone of the philosopher's lectures in the philosophy course. But Stevens' admiration for Santayana was great and enduring. In the *Necessary Angel* Stevens wrote:

> There can be lives, nevertheless, which exist by the deliberate choice of those that live them. To use a single illustration: it may be assumed that the life of Professor Santayana is a life in which the function of the imagination has had a function similar to its function in any deliberate work or art or letters. We have only to think of this present phase of it, in which, in his old age, dwells in the head of the world, in the company of devoted women, in their convent, and in the company of familiar saints, whose presence does so much to make any convent an appropriate refuge for a generous and human philosopher.

Not only this, Stevens also read with interest George Santayana's views on aesthetics and may unconsciously have been influenced by them. For Santayana himself paid a tribute to the imagination which must have struck responsive chords in Stevens and his work:

> The feeling of significance signifies little. All we have . . . is a potentiality of imagination; and only when this potentiality begins to be realized in definite ideas, does a real meaning, or any object which that meaning can mean, arise in the mind. . . . To learn to see in nature and to enshrine in the arts of the typical forms of things; to study and recognize their variations; to domesticate the imagination in the world, so that everywhere beauty can be seen, and a hint for artistic creation—that is the goal of contemplation. Progress lies in the direction of discrimination and precision, not in that of formless emotion and reverie. (George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, 151-52).

This personal and intellectual affinity called for a funeral tribute when the old philosopher expired, and Stevens' "To an Old Philosopher of Rome" is a well-meant and fully deserved tribute.

SUMMARY

Stanza 1

The poem begins with a picture of a magnificent man in the throes of death. Understandably, there are no sentimental tears shed for the great man who was, in Stevens' view, too great for tears. Stevens rather sees his death as a mingling of two thresholds—our, this earthly threshold and the threshold of heaven. As men majestically move toward this other threshold from the world, the focus of vision changes, but not the fact of their magnificence. They grow small because of the distance of time and space, but their smaller words, microcosm, merges with larger world, the macrocosm toward which they move in a dignified manner.

Stanza 2

The second stanza makes it clear what the earthly threshold is. The earthly threshold which the philosopher is leaving is the grand, architecturally satisfying city of Rome with its lofty domes and structures. And the philosopher shared in the grandeur of the city because of the grandeur of his mind. This is one way of showing how the inch and the mile, the individual and the cosmos, partake of the same.

Stanza 3

How easily the blown banners are transformed to wings, angelic wings. Things which are beyond perception become companions of fortune of the spirit, something which the eye can no longer see. Nor can the mind know anything of its sphere, though it does not seem to be far beyond.

Stanza 4

It is a mingling of two magnificences: the extreme of the known merges in the presence of the extreme of the unknown. Because of this grandeur the focus of perception changes: the muttering of the newspaper sellers become another kind of murmuring. The ordinary things in the room (of the philosopher) assume a different personality.

Stanzas 5-6-7

"The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,/The candle as it evades the sight"—are clearly perceived objects, but in case of the philosopher's deathbed they all merge with a sense of the life of the city as the sound of its bells drifts in through the window. All these will now remain permanent shapes among the shapes of Rome. These have already coloured their surroundings and provided them a new transparence. There is a "moving transparence on the nuns," and the light of the candle is struggling to tear against the wick so as to join a hovering excellence, to escape from the fire and be a part of that which fire symbolizes, the possible celestial. The old philosoper, having arrived at a poetic vision of reality in which nothing of the poverty of the human condition is denied, becomes an orator with an accurate tongue and in his voice each man can hear his own.

Stanzas 8-10

The philosopher's vision of reality is such that the beholders begin to behold themselves in the old man:

> So that we feel, in this illumined large,
> The veritable small, so that each of us
> Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice
> In yours, master and commiserable man.

Each seems to have become intent on the particles of his vision.

Dozing in the depths of wakefulness in the warmth of his bed, the philosopher lives in two worlds. He has no regrets about the one he is losing and he is humble and "most penitent" toward the other he is entering. The old man thus lies in the poverty of

human ends, yet he lies in triumph, with his own achievement complete in a succession of shapes.

Stanzas 11-12

Even as the old philosopher dies and the blood of his heart lies down, it lies like the blood of an empire, for the philosopher appears to be a citizen of heaven though still of Rome. His speech seeks us out of our poverty (spiritual poverty) and it sounds older than Rome's. And though the philosopher is now dumb, his voice (his poetry and philosophy) continues to speak to us the loftiest syllables among the loftiest things. It is he who appears to be the one "invulnerable man" among the crudities of the worldly things. Among the imperial and religious structures of Rome, his is the only one which is not stained by rain.

Stanzas 13-16

The sounds of the bells in the cathedral drift in through the windows. The life of the city has become a part of the life in the room; the philosopher would not wish it otherwise. The domes of the city have merged with the domes of the philosopher's death-bed. The bells continue to ring in "choruses and choirs of choruses" because they are quite unwilling that mercy should be a mystery of silence. Everything is a kind of total grandeur at the end; and it is in this grandeur that everything around bathes. The articles in the room are no longer separate, identifiable items, like chairs, bed, moving nuns, the pillared porch, the book, and candle in the ambered room: all of them now partake of the total grandeur of a total edifice, the monument of the mind that the great inquisitor of structures (George Santayana) had sought. He stops to exist in this threshold as if the design of his philosophical monument had been realized and shaped in this last grandeur of edifice.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The Central Theme

The central theme of "To an Old Philosopher of Rome" is Stevens' concern with the reality of human grandeur that can be achieved in an individual life. Stevens felt that in Santayana's life, the life of the imagination had a function "similar to its function in any deliberate work of art or letters" (*Necessary Angel*). But this is a function which does not deny the poverty of the human condition. That is why the poem shows George Santayana as having achieved the grandeur of an edifice among the architectural masterpieces of the holy city of Rome.

The poem also takes up another of Stevens' long standing concerns; namely the harmony between man and his universe. In case of George Santayana's life as well as death, Stevens found such a harmony: To the viewer of reality everything in the philosopher's room is bathed in the grandeur of his personality. But only this, the people who look at him begin to partake of the grandeur of the man and momentarily at least find themselves quite transformed:

So that we feel, in this illumined large,
The veritable small, so that each of us
Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice
In you, master and commiserable man. . . .

The threshold of the earth, symbolized by the philosopher's room in Rome merges with the threshold of heaven, thereby indicating a fusion of the microcosm with the macrocosm. And in this fusion, the poem rises above the particular, for it shows the chances of grandeur in human lives in this worldly sense; for it shows the fulfilment of human existence in Santayana's reconciliation of flesh and spirit.

Stevens' Tone and Imagery

The poem shows Stevens' great admiration for the power of thinking, for the constructive power of deliberate choice. This is why he describes the death of George Santayana as a culmination of the life of spirit. To describe such a life and death, sentimentality is totally uncalled for, and this is why Stevens carefully avoids sentimentalizing. The reader is led to a mighty edifice, fully realized and completed. This explains why Stevens uses the imagery drawn from architecture in this poem:

Total grandeur of total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon this threshold
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized.

The domes of the city are the architecture of the bed and as James Baired remarks, these domes are "the shapes antecedent to the shape that lingers there". Needless to add, the dome imagery is the richest tribute paid to this great shaper who in all of his writings tried to domesticate imagination in the world so that everywhere beauty could be seen.

Conclusion

As a commemorative poem, "To an Old Philosopher of Rome" has been frequently compared with Milton's *Lycidas*; for

it has to tell us of a singular poetic being, of questions of fame and the endurance of art. It is also a remarkable example of Stevens' firm grip over his medium. As Randall Jarrell remarks, "This is a great poem of a new kind. The completeness and requiredness of the poem's working out; the held-back yet magically sure, fully extended slowness with which these parallel worlds near each other and meet, remind one of the slow movements of some of Beethoven's later quartets and sonatas. But poems like these, in their plainness and human rightness, remind me most of a work of art superficially very different, Verdi's *Falstaff*. Both are the products of men at once very óld and beyond the dominion of age; such men seem to have entered into . . . a new existence, a world in which everything is enlarged and yet no more than itself, transfigured and yet beyond the need of transfiguration."

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
   Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.
   It is as if in a human dignity
   Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
   Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.

Explanation—Forming a part of "To an Old Philosopher of Rome," these lines express Stevens' great tribute to a great philosopher George Santayana. Here Stevens establishes an identification between the grandeur that belonged to this great philosopher and to Rome where he belonged and died in. These lines show how the grandeur of George Santayana's spirit was identical with the spirit of Rome in all its spiritual splendour and architecture. It is as if the two parallels of grandeur could be so close to each other physically as well as spiritually. But Santayana's identification is not only with Rome; according to Stevens it is with that more "merciful Rome" of the philosopher's afterlife. These lines thus aptly bring out Stevens' great admiration for George Santayana whom he knew personally at Harvard and whose theory of the poetry and philosophy, a theory which insisted on a close relation between the physical and the spiritual, Stevens himself shared. The poem has been rightly compared with Milton's *Lycidas* because of its elegiac tone, but it is also consistent with Stevens' own theory of the idetification between the man and the world. Santayana seemed to Stevens to be just that kind of person who led a life "in which the function of the imagination has had a function similar to its function in any deliberate work of art or letters." This is why Stevens uses the imagery of architecture to speak of Santayana's achievement.

2. In a confusion on bed and books, a portent
   On the chair, a moving transparence on the nuns,

A light on the candle tearing against the wick
To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part only of that of which
Fire is the symbol.

Explanation—Stevens had a great regard and admiration for the poet philosopher George Santayana whose death he mourned in "To an Old Philosopher of Rome," of an elegy which has rightly been compared with Milton's *Lycidas*. Stevens knew Santayana personally when he was at Harvard and found in him a living example of what his philosophy emphasized: a synthesis of the physical and the spiritual. These lines movingly describe the death-bed of George Santayana and imagines his glorious passing away. The dying personality of the philosopher spread its transparence to the surroundings in the bed, so that the nuns of the convent (George Santayana retired to a convent of nuns in Rome after teaching in USA). The death of the philosopher is aptly described as the struggle of the light as it tore the wick of the candle in order to join a hovering excellence and thereby to become a part of that eternal fire of which the earthly fire is only a distant embodiment. The stanza also describes Stevens' own theory of an identification and synthesis between man and his world. Here he describes the synthesis that George Santayana had achieved in his life: a synthesis of the spiritual and the spiritual and the physical, of man and the world.

3. It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
With every visible thing enlarged and yet
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns.
The immensest theatre, the pillard porch,
The book and candle in your ambered room.

Explanation—These lines pay a glorious tribute to the poet-philosopher George Santayana in Stevens' "To an Old Philosopher of Rome." Stevens admired George Santayana not only for his poetry and philosophy but also for the great synthesis of imagination and reality, of the spiritual and the physical that this philosopher had achieved in his life. In this poem, written after the death of George Santayana, Stevens describes this great philosopher as one whose personal grandeur transformed the surroundings in such a way that they also began to partake of this excellence. Every visible thing in the room where the philosopher died had acquired a double status: literally it remained what it was, but at the same time it seemed to bathe in the grandeur that George Satayana had left behind. The bed, the chair, the moving nuns, the porch, the book, and the candle, everything had now acquired a double significance after having been transformed by the philosopher's total grandeur.

4. Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized.

Explanation—These concluding lines of "To an Old Philosopher of Rome" sum up Stevens' grand tribute to the poet-philosopher George Santayana. Using the image of architecture, Stevens describes the philosopher as an inquisitor of structures, the man who had closely examined the structure of thought for himself and the world. Having established his intellectual and philosophical edifice of total grandeur, the philosopher stopped at the threshold of knowledge and left behind his books in which are to be found the structures of his achievement as a poet, thinker and philosopher. The edifice of George Santayana's life and thought, according to Stevens, has now become an inseparable part of the architectural grandeur of Rome to which Santayana belonged and where he died.

32. VACANCY IN THE PARK

Introduction

"Vacancy in the Park" belongs to Stevens' *Rock* group of poems. The poem develops by way of analogy the theme of the title, "Vacancy in the Park," which is itself a symbol for the writer's mind and his quest for new ideas as well as an analysis of the old.

SUMMARY

The setting for the analogy is that of the beginning of spring in March. Some one seems to have walked across the snow and left a vacancy in the park. It is like a man who has left in search of something he does not know. The rest of the poem provides analogy after analogy for the vacancy. It looks like a boat having pulled away from a shore at night and disappeared in the unfathomable sea. Or, it is like a guitar left on a table by a woman who has forgotten it. Or, it is like the feeling of a man who has come back to see a certain house and is unsure whether the house he has come to is the one he was looking for. The winds from all the directions—north, south, east and west—continue to blow through the rustic park under its mattresses of vines.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The poem skilfully conveys the idea of a vacancy in the park by way of several analogies. The vacancy is, however, more mental than spatial. The poet, at the end of his carrier, is busy re-examining the dimensions and the four walls of his spiritual house and wonder-

ing what it is that has gone and what it is he is searching. The poem is remarkable for its geometrical symbolism of a square which is all empty from within: square park; four winds blowing from four directions. As James Baird has pointed out, "A final evidence from Stevens, and one considerably more open to analysis, is his preference for a metaphor of compass points...The poet moves in his vision from South to North. The continuum of nature moves endlessly from East to West. It should first be noted that these are of the four-squareness which engages the imagination of Stevens in his attention to seasonal progression or to an absolute precision of direction. A good example of the second appears in the composition of "Vacancy in the Park." In this last collection, "The Rock," the aging poet examines his house of the mind. The scene is shaped in the quadriangular balance of Renaissance painting:"

> It is like a guitar left on a table
> By a woman, who has forgotten it.
>
> It is like the feeling of a man
> Come back to see a certain house.
>
> The four winds blow through the rustic arbor
> Under its mattresses of vines.

In style and diction this poem is comparable to another mature and well-known poem of Stevens, "Clear Day and No Memories." In that poem Stevens conveys the consciousness of absence in the mind much in the same way that he describes the vacancy in the mind and, of course, analyzes of the "house" of the mind.

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

"Vacancy in the Park" symbolically expresses Stevens' quest for ideas as well as his examination of the existing ideas. It conveys the idea of an intellectual vacancy by means of several carefully chosen analogies. The setting is described as that of a landscape in the month of March. Someone looking for something he does not know has left his footmarks on the March snow. Another analogy is that of a boat which has pulled away from the shore and disappeared in the sea, leaving no trace behind. But in both the cases, the vacancy is experienced: in the first case, the absence of the man whose footprints are on the snow; in the second instance, the absence of the boat from the shore. Still another analogy chosen by Stevens is that of a guitar having been forgotten by a woman on a table. The guitar clearly reminds of a woman, because guitar would not come to the table all by itself. The fourth analogy is of the feeling of a man who has come back to see a certain house but does not know what it is that he wants to see again. The poem thus aptly brings out the sense of vacancy which is basically a metaphorical

vacancy in the poem. It is also a fine example of how presence and absence of objects work simultaneously on the human consciousness, much in the same way that a word used suggests the possibility of its synonym as well as antonym.

33. NOT IDEAS ABOUT THE THING BUT THE THING ITSELF

Introduction

"Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" is appropriately enough the last word that Wallace Stevens has on the subject of reality in his *Collected Poems*. For throughout his poetry Stevens is concerned with the quest for reality bare of all human projections, religious or philosophical. This poem then finally returns to the question of reality and asserts that one should concern oneself not with ideas about reality as given by others but with reality itself. As usual in Stevens, the point is made with the help of an imaginary situation.

SUMMARY

Divided into six stanzas of three lines each, the poem begins with the persona's response to a "scrawny cry" from outside that he hears at the earliest ending of winter in March. The cry seemed to echo something from his own consciousness. He thought that he had already heard it and it was in his consciousness: a bird's cry at daylight or before in the early March wind.

The sun was rising since it was six O'clock in the morning and it did not seem to be a battered plume (like the battered plume of a bird) above the winter snow which was still there. The sun was clearly outside the persona's consciousness and not at all a product of the "vast ventriloquism/Of sleep's fade paper-mache" (not at all a creation of the mind, but an objective reality).

What the persona heard was a scrawny (scraggy) cry. It was a sound which preceded the idea of choir in the persona's mind. It was clearly an external phenomenon and part of the large, immense reality of the sun, altogether outside the persona's consciousness. As Susan Weston comments on these lines of the poem, "The bird's 'c' pre-c's the choir's, as the c—sounds echo and build to the thundering 'colossal sun,' then diminish and contract again: 'surrounded by its choral rings,/Still far away.' The single chorister will also code his song to the larger sound of the whole choir, and thus 'precedes' the choir in the sense that the choir too yields to the sun. It is perhaps Stevens' finest poetry, but it is all metaphor: only 'like/A new knowledge of reality' for the old man in his bed at dawn."

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem has deservedly invited a lot of critical comment both because it comes as a summing up of Stevens' views on reality and the nature of poetry, views which he presents in several other poems such as "The Snow Man," "Of Modern Poetry," "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract," and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." It also states the problem of perception of reality and its expression in a language which is full of pre-conceived ideas and notions. Can one actually hear a song of a bird, no matter how elementary or shrill the song is, without trying to impose any meaning on it from his consciousness? The poem thus deals with the problem of the projections which the perceiver brings to bear upon the object of his perception, an object which has an independent, external existence. Thus it is the relation between the subject (the perceiver) and the object (the thing or phenomenon that is perceived which is problematic). The point is beautifully illustrated from a simple instance: the scrawny cry of a bird at the end of winter.

In his earlier book on Wallace Stevens, Riddell thinks that the poem proclaims "a discovery of the 'thing' beyond the mind, but... this 'thing' shares with the mind a mutual origin (in the 'colossal sun)' ... the self, as part of nature, shares a bodily being with the sun. But as it moves toward consciousness, the mind composes its own world ... Man can know of otherness but not know it—except as he is sustained and hence contained by it. The 'new Knowledge,' however minimal, of the world, is an escape from solipsism, but in no sense a resolution to Stevens' problem." The poem makes an assertion—It was a new knowledge of reality, but this assertion is presented by means of a tentative analogy: "It was like a new knowledge of reality." A poet who wishes to express reality must do so in language, but language itself is full of metaphor. As a result, all expression must be tentative, hesitant. Stevens thus recognizes that reality is outside human consciousness and needs an expression which is bare of human projections, but at the same time any linguistic rendering will contain human ideas. One must have a mind of winter to express the winter landscape, but a "mind of winter" is itself a metaphor! So, one should try to look at the thing as in itself it really is, but the angle of vision is coloured by so many factors: inherited, subconscious ideas in the mind of the perceiver, the difficulties imposed by language and the resultant interaction, first between the perceiving "I" and the perceived object, and then between the perceived reality and the rhetorical language which is not an adequate enough medium for expressing reality. The thing, the object perceived, has an existence outside the ideas that the perceiver of the object brings to bear on his perception, and herein lies the crux of the problem.

Thus, though it is desirable to know the difference between the two, perceiving consciousness and outside reality, between the ideas about a thing and the thing itself, the poem itself shows how difficult it is to maintain a purity of perception while viewing external reality. We should not expect Stevens to give any final answer to solve this problem; instead, we must appreciate his recognition that the difference exists and it is quite difficult to express it.

EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,
A bird's cry, at daylight or before,
In the early March wind.

Explanation—These opening tercets of Stevens' "Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself" express, with illustration, Stevens' theory of perception and of the interaction between the subject (the mind of the perceiver) and the object (the thing he perceives). The persona, described as "he", heard a scraggy cry of a bird at the earliest end of winter in March. The cry clearly came from outside and yet it seemed to have come from his mind. He knew that it was not so, that he had clearly heard it as an external sound, and that there was no mistake about it. But why did it then echo something from his own mind? The point is the problematic relation between human consciousness and the object of perception. Reality is and has to be objective, but the perceiver of reality brings his own consciousness with him and looks at it as his own mind directs him. This is why even the purely external cry of a bird seemed to the persona to have come from his own mind, though it was clearly an external sound. This is what makes perception difficult, and this is why Stevens argued in his "The Snow Man" that one must have a mind of winter to look at the winter landscape and behold only that which is not there, not the nothing of his own mind.

2. That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun.

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.

Explanation—These concluding tercets of "Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself" aptly summarize Stevens' views on

the problematic relationship between the subject (the perceiving consciousness) and the object of perception. Giving an illustration of the scraggy cry of a bird which the persona heard, Stevens says that the cry was clearly an external sound with a clear background. There could be no mistake about that. And yet the perceiver thought it had echoed a sound from within his own mind. The sound "c" of the cry clearly came before the echo, the choir, of the mind, and it was part of the colossal sun (the clear objective reality). But even this reality was in a way distant and unreachable because of the barrier created by the perceiver's own consciousness. This is the new knowledge of reality that the perceiver in the poem has discovered. The poem is thus a fine commentary on Stevens' theory of the tangled relation between imagination, perception and description.

34. A CLEAR DAY AND NO MEMORIES

Introduction

"A Clear Day and No Memories" is a remarkable example from Stevens' later poetry of dazzling clarity in a ceaseless agitation. Apparently, this poem describes a scene, a shallow spectacle, of a clear day with no memories from the past to trouble the clarity of the atmosphere. But in reality it emphasizes the nothingness in the midst of a transparent clarity.

SUMMARY

The poem consists of two stanzas, the first consisting of seven lines and the second of six lines. The first stanza begins with an emphatic "NO" describing the non-memories of things which existed fifty years ago:

> No soldiers in the scenery,
> No thoughts of people now dead,
> As they were fifty years ago,
> Young and walking in the sunshine,
> Bending in blue dresses to touch something.

That is to say, the present has lost memories of what was there fifty years ago. Remarkably, there was a close harmony between the people, whose non-memory is being talked about, and the atmosphere or environment. "*Young and living* in the *live air*," and "Young and walking in the sunshine," and "Bending in blue dresses to touch something." This concreteness, this tangible contact, has now disappeared: "Today the mind is part of the weather" says the last line of this opening stanza.

The second stanza concentrates on the clarity, a clarity of nothingness that exists now:

> Today the air is clear of everything.
> It has no knowledge except of nothingness
> And it flows over us without meanings,
> As if none of us had ever been here before,
> And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,
> This invisible activity, this sense.

That is to say, the atmosphere, the "weather" of the first stanza is "clear of everything." No memories remain. The only knowledge that exists is of nothingness and it flows over us without any meaning for us, as if none of us had existed here before and exists here even today. The whole spectacle is empty, lawfully clear in its emptiness, its vacancy created by thoughts of the past and nothingness of the present. The last line, "This invisible activity, this sense," however, suggests an active principle that still prevails even if it emphasizes nothing but nothingness.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Though no activity seems to take place in the poem, there is yet an invisible activity, a hidden presence underlying the non-presence, just as there is a memory of the non-memory, a realization of what was there fifty years ago and which does not exist now. But concealed in this awful clarity, there is, as Steven Shaviro observes, a positive and material movement, the "clarity of the weather, the motion of the air. It precedes appearance and produces a phantasmic 'scenery' irreducible to either memory or simple presence." What is more, though the past of fifty years ago is no longer remembered and the only knowledge that the present offers is one of nothingness, negation is here something powerful and threatening, rather than simply negative and passive. As Shaviro adds, "The past is affirmed without being rendered present just as the presence of the present moment is elided. The appositional chain of the first stanza moves without transition from the positive nonpresence of the past to that of 'today.' Grammatically, lines 3-6 are subordinated to the 'people now dead' of line 2, governed by the initial 'No'. But the paratactic syntax works against this 'No' and foregrounds the positivity of the descriptions. The poem shuttles between past and present, so that neither moment is fully realized but neither can be negated...The thoughts, or non-memories, of 'A Clear Day and No Memories' vibrate endlessly in the virtual space between pure negation and simple presence, between 'no' and 'now.' "

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Stanza 1

This opening stanza of Stevens' "A Clear Day and No Memories" bemoans the feeling of nothingness that grips the persona. He finds no soldiers in the scenery, feels nothing about the people who died some fifty years ago, and has no memory of how young and living they once were in a lively atmosphere. He has even forgotten how they walked in the sunshine, as they bent in their blue dresses as if to touch something. But the poem clearly deconstructs itself. The people and the things that the persona says he can no longer remember are still quite fresh in his mind as they were fifty years ago; for he can still correctly describe their liveliness, and moments. But what in fact he seems to bemoan is the feeling of loss of nothingness. All that was there fifty years ago is no longer there. Worse still, the kind of rapport that was there between the people and the atmosphere or surroundings (Stevens' word here is "weather") is altogether missing. So it is this loss that the persona laments.

Stanza 2

The second stanza describes the present as opposed to the past which has figured in the form of non-memories of things that belonged to a period in the past. Today the atmosphere is clear of everything. The old rapport has been lost. All that one knows today is a clear knowledge of one's nothingness, which continues to flow without meaning anything, so much so that one begins to doubt if one's life has got any meaning or significance. Everything has become a shallow spectacle in which the only thing that prevails is not the absence of knowledge but the awful knowledge of nothingness. (For further comments on this stanza, see "Critical Commentary" given above).

35. THE COURSE OF A PARTICULAR

Introduction

"The Course of a Particular" is one of Stevens' late poems. Like "A Clear Day and No Memories" and "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," This poem is also concerned with Stevens' exploration of the subject-object dualism. It sees the binary opposition of inside and outside, self and world, subject and object, imagination and reality as an effect produced within a larger economy of excess and defect. Unlike "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," which speaks of a perfect harmony between the subject and the object, man and environment,

"The Course of a Particular" emphasizes the separation between the two. In this respect this poem is also comparable with the early "The Snow Man" in which the perceiver is advised to keep his subjective consciousness outside of and separate from the object of perception; in this poem the poet goes to the extent of saying that the dualism is such that it cannot be easily resolved.

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The poem consists of only fifteen lines. The setting is a winter landscape. The wind is blowing and the rustle of the leaves is heard by a human agent, the perceptive poet-persona who is described as "one". The rest of the poem describes the perceiver's attempt to read some symbolic, spiritual or human meaning in the cry of the leaves, while the situation shows how the setting resists such an interpretation.

As the leaves utter their cry, the perceiver-poet-persona wonders what this cry means and why it is uttered by the leaves. The cry of the leaves certainly reduces or minimizes the sense of nothingness that the winter-landscape (as in the early "The Snow Man") presents, even though the signs of wintry nothingness, icy shades shapen snow" emphasize this wintry nothingness.

The leaves cry. The perceiver holds off and merely hears the cry of the leaves. It sounds like a busy cry which concerns someone else. And though one often says that one is part of the environment or the object perceived, there is a resistance to such an attitude. For even being part of the environment or of process for that matter is an exertion that declines the very idea of being part.

The leaves cry but their cry cannot be given any spiritual dimension. Nor can it be treated as something heroic or even human. (There is no scope for investing the cry of the leaves with any human feeling; there being just no scope for this kind of pathetic fallacy). For it is a cry of the leaves which do not transcend themselves and so refuse the imposition of any transcendental meaning on themselves.

Since there is no scope for any fantasy-mongering which the situation calls for, because the situation is just when it is, the cry seems to defy any interpretation except the very fact of its incomprehensible being.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Like many poems of Stevens' late career, "The Course of a Particular" is a difficult poem not because of its language or the situation it describes, but because of the complexity of its thought.

This complexity is inherent in the two words of the title itself: "course" and "particular." The "course" suggests the process of incessant change, while the "particular" relates to the identity and individuality of an object which is in process. While the process itself consists of the many particulars, each particular which is "part" of the whole still has its own identity which the course threatens. As Stevens Shaviro comments, ' The particular cannot be separated from the cry of desire, from the universal relation in which it is latenly generated; but to the extent that it participates in that relation, its identity is threatened by the continuing play of metamorphosis. Insofar as the particular still insists as a difference, it has not achieved definitive separation from the unity without totality in which it is produced. . . . The particular cannot subsist apart from its inevitably declining course . . . The relation of part to whole remains always in process: the part continually 'holds off' from its whole, and the whole is not the combination of the parts but their breaking apart."

The main idea of the poem is this problematic relationship between the process and the particular, as well as between the object and the subject. The poet cannot separate himself from the cry of the leaves and from the winter landscape, but neither can he claim or recognize that cry as his own. The tendency to invest the cry of the leaves with some human meaning or some mythological interpretation is irresistible. Harold Bloom, for instance, opines that "the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves are not leaves that utter a cry, and such a cry testifies to the presence of fantasia." But *fantasia* is the very thing that the poem seems to question. As Shaviro observes, "The cry is entirely immanent to the leaves, and one cannot interpret it or give it meaning. The divine, the heroic, and the merely human in turn fail to contextualize it; they are all swept away and, in a subliminal pun, the leaves are all that is left. . . . The 'conflict' and 'resistance' in the poem are not in the poet's psyche but in 'the thing/Itself' in its particularity. As wholly immanent, the cry is wholly private, 'until at last, the cry concerns no one at all'." In the world of Joseph N. Riddel, "One feels identity with his world by sensing his separation from it, by feeling 'the resistance involved ' The final resolution is not transcendence but the insensible blending of men and world in the dark sarcophagus; for Stevens knows that Whitman's 'clew' is not the secret of passage but the 'final' finding.' The perceiver in the poem, the poet-persona who is neutrally referred to as "one," thus neither asserts the universality of his subjective fantasy nor does he apprehend the reality of the world apart from the self. Rather, as Shaviro says "he discovers a continuing otherness as the very principle of his own self-enclosed subjectivity. If 'Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself' affirms an outside that is already inside, then 'The Course of a

Particular' affirms the inside as already a difference, already outside."

To sum up, the poem is a fine example of the manner in which Stevens dislocates the traditional Romantic and modernist paradigms. It neither imputes inner life to an object world nor denies such an imputation. Stevens is not puzzling over epistemological dilemmas but radically questioning the very terms in which these dilemmas are traditionally stated.

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

The first three lines of the poem depict the initial situation: a winter landscape full of icy shades and shapen snow, and the leaves of the trees hanging on the branches which are swept by wind. The cry of the leaves reduces the nothingness of this desolate winter landscape. It does not eliminate the winter scene, but it breaks the desolate silence that prevails in the whole atmosphere. But this initial situation, as the rest of the poem makes it clear, is a mare peg to hang Stevens' ideas on issue of subject-object, perceiver-perceived, reality-imagination, and part-whole dualisms. The title—"The Course of a Particular"—itself suggests an inherent duality.

The next six lines describe the winter landscape with the focus on the cry of the leaves. The perceiver holds off his subconscious interpretation of the cry of the leaves, as the leaves cry. For it seems to him that the cry is a thing in itself which concerns someone else. The persona would like to find an involvement, a subjective participation, in the cry of the leaves. But he realizes that even though we say that one is part of one's perception, there is a certain conflict, a clear resistance in this relationship. To be part of a process means to be part of the decline that characterizes the process. The tendency to invest the cry with some human meaning is irresistible, but that is something which the cry itself rejects.

The poet-persona then tries to give a metaphorical or spiritual dimension to the cry of the leaves. But soon he realizes that one cannot at all associate this cry with anything metaphysical or divine. Nor can one invest it with some heroic or romantic meanings, something which the Romantic tried to suggest by means of the pathetic fallacy. The cry defies even human involvement; for it is the cry of the leaves that don't transcend themselves. So, in the absence of an allegorical interpretation, the cry of the leaves in the blowing of the wind is simply the cry, the thing itself. And so, at refuses to be invested with any meaning apart from its being what it is. The dualism between the perceiver and the perceived, in this case the cry of the leaves, is thus quite evident. But these

lines raise two vital questions: Can such a separation be actually possible. And, secondly, can one really establish the identity of a thing apart from the process of which it is part? In other words, as Yeats asked the question in his "Among School Children," "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

36. REALITY IS AN ACTIVITY TO THE MOST AUGUST IMAGINATION

Introduction

This is yet another poem on Stevens' ideas on the subtle relationship between reality and imagination. The title describes reality itself as an activity of the most august imagination, while the poem itself illustrates how the interplay of imagination and reality re-creates a new artistic scene out of the landscape from Cornwall to Hartford.

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The poem describes a journey by car from Cornwall to Hartford and what the occupants of the car, including the poet-persona, saw on their way. The night did not seem to be the picture of a night as though blown in a glass-factory in Vienna or Venice and so lifeless. It was rather a landscape in motion during the time of an actual night. As the car moved with the westward evening star in the sky, the occupants witnessed in the landscape a strength of glory, a glory which permeated their own veins. As the car moved, things moved and dissolved, seemed distant, and then disappeared out of the view. Everything seemed transformed in the course of this summer night. What seemed to emerge was a silvery (argentine) abstraction, an idea about a beautiful silvery, night-drenched landscape between Cornwall and Hartford, but even this apparently solid silvery abstraction was also dissolved. As a result, the moonlight lake seemed to be neither water nor air; it had been sufficiently transformed by the imagination to remain either.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The subtle relationship between reality and imagination is a recurrent theme in Wallace Stevens' poetry. Though reality and imagination are two separate things, yet the perception of reality is always coloured by imagination. That is, to say, when a viewer or perceiver, looks at reality, he looks of it from a perspective which comes from his own consciousness. It may consist of his inherited ideas, his own particular mood at the moment, or from

what he thinks the reality may signify or symbolize. That is why, according to Stevens, it becomes very difficult to separate reality from imagination. To look at the bare reality, one must have a mind of winter, as Stevens argues in "The Snow Man," but even as one says it imagination has already transferred the snowy reality of the winter to the consciousness of the perceiver; otherwise, he would not use the metaphor "mind of winter."

Not that there is anything bad in looking at reality with the help of imagination. For, as Stevens frequently argues, reality in itself is boring, mechanical and repetitious. It is imagination which gives life, beauty and variety to the reality. In the present poem, Stevens goes further than that and asserts that "Reality is itself an activity of the imagination". This may sound to be something far-fetched. But Stevens' description of the landscape reveals several vital factors about how reality itself becomes an activity of the most august imagination. The whole reality of the landscape that the poet-persona perceives during a car-journey from Cornwall to Harford is unquestionable; but it is also true that as he finds this reality (factual details of objects seen on the way) it provides material for his imagination. The interplay between the two begins and the poet-persona discovers an abstraction out of the reality, an abstraction which dissolves as fast as the object get out of sight. As a result the process of metamorphosis takes place: everything appears transformed. The night's moonlight lake appears to be neither water nor air.

EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

The poem consists of even unrhymed couplets and describes poet-persona's car-journey and his experience on the way from Cornwall to Hartford. It was the time of a summer night and the day was Friday, suggesting the beginning of a week-end holiday. The journey began late under the full light of the moon. As the poet-persona looked at the landscape outside, everything seemed to be transformed under the light of the moon. The objects that he saw outside were not artistically chiselled works manufactured in the glass-factories in Vienna or Venice in Europe, for art objects are lifeless and static; they gather dust in their shelves and lack the life, movement and vitality which belongs to real objects of nature. Even as the sounds from the landscape seemed to crush and grind under the westward evening star, it was clear that it was not the making of glass in a glass factory, but reality in its own setting. There was a real strength and vigour (as contrasted from the fragility of glass) as things emerged in view and then looked distant and finally disappeared out of view. Whatever the case, each object seemed to have been transformed by the summer night, which was real, and not a product of the imagination. It

seemed as though under the light of the full moon a silvery abstraction was taking from and then suddenly dissolving itself. The objects were real and solid, but as the poet-persona saw them they seemed to become insolid (because of the fleeting movement of the car and its consequent effect on the vision of the perceiver). Even the lake bathed in the glory of the moonlight seemed to have been transformed: one could not say whether it consisted of water or air. This was then reality in its active form, appearing and dissolving itself, and thereby feeding the most august imagination with ideas about the comlpex relationship between reality and imagination. In short, what the poem emphasizes is the complex, at times problematic, relationship between reality and imagination. One cannot think of the one without the other; for reaiity informs the imagination which in turn, metamorphoses the objects of reality so that they no longer seen real but appear as the products of an august imagination.

37. THE WOMAN THAT HAD MORE BABIES THAN THAT

Introduction

"The Woman That Had More Babies Than That" was first written in 1939 but not included in any collection, not even in *The Collected Poems* of 1954. It was subsequently published by Morse in *Opus Posthumous*, published in 1957, two years after Stevens' death. It is like "Red Love Kit" which was also suppressed by Stevens, one of those poems which according to James Baird deal with Stevens' ascription to the Queen, the consort of imagination. The poem consists of three sections. The first provides a setting by the sea-shore where the seascape shows a repetition of the same movement time and time again and thereby implies the need for something more than a mere repetition, repeated continually. The second section provides details of the children of the consort of imagination who are not satisfied with a meaningless repetition, but look for more. The third section in the coda in which the "Woman That Had More Babies Than That," that is, the consort of the imagination, is finally celebrated as if she were a huge lively marble statue placed on a marble rock.

SUMMARY

Section 1

This section provides the setting of the poem. An acrobat, perhaps the poet-persona, is sitting on the sea-shore and observing the raising and the swell of the waves as they strike against the

beach. There is the preparation for the wave, its striking with the beach and the forming of the foam, with everything finally setting like a "dancer's skirt, flung round the settling down," and then beginning again. There is something clearly repetitious, mechanical in this whole process. This leads the poet-persona to think of that woman who has had more babies than that: that is, imagination which is not satisfied with the monotonous reality of the landscape or the seascape and wants to create more beauty and variety, thereby improving upon the identical, monotonous and repetitious products of Nature which is the mother of the landscape and the seascape.

Section 2

The first section thus paves the ground for a thesis about the needs of the children of imagination, artists, poets, painters and philosophers, who cannot be satisfied with the monotonous repetition that Nature produces in the form of the real, objective world. These children of imagination cannot but think of the central man who in turn observes the phenomena of nature and feels inspired by the urge to re-create these phenomena with the help of imagination. All the old men, philosophers, bald-headed scholars and poets, are haunted by that maternal voice. They do not consider themselves as simply parts of the universal machine which produces nothing but repetition, repetead continually. In the solitude they reflect on this meaningless, monotonous repetition of the universal and look for expressions of something which is beautiful, varied, and imaginatively rich. They desire for a fiery lullaby from their mother, who is consort of imagination, the woman that had had more babies than the one universal machine produced by Nature.

Section 3

This final section sings an apotheosis of the consort of imagination, who is described as the woman that had had more babies than that single repetition which Nature produces. The poet-persona first envisions her with her head seen from the plain of marble. But no, she is not a lifeless statue. She is present in the crackling summer night, in the towns, beside a window, beside a lamp, in a day of the week, the time before spring. This woman, the consort of the imagination thus becomes a presence felt everywhere. Without being supernatural, this consort of the imagination virtually gains a supernatural status because of her all-pervasiveness.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Though suppressed from Stevens' collections of poems during his lifetime, "The Women That Had Had More Babies That That"

is one of the many poems by Stevens which deal with his theory of imagination and reality. Reality is often monotonous and repetitious and needs to be coloured with imagination so as to be acceptable to the human mind which is never wholly satisfied with the reality and tries to transform it.

As usual, in Stevens' poetry, this poem also begins with a concrete situation which is later used as evidence for the thesis that the poet-persona wishes to propound. As James Baird has noted, "The Woman That Had More Babies Than That" takes a long look at the sea." The wave of the swell goes on day after day, leaving its line of glitter, 'like a dancer's skirt, flung round, and settling down,' over the sand. The repetitions are mechanical. The wheel returns and returns, along the dry, salt shore. In this place of again-and-again-the same, Nature, the sovereign mother of all rulers, has one baby and only one. But the woman who had more babies than that breathes on her children with a maternal voice. She is the giver of ideas that come to the 'sense of speech.' She defies the 'universal machine' with her 'fiery lullaby.' She is the consort of an imaginatio

This poem thus points out the necessity for imagination in order to transform the reality of the factual, objective world. For Stevens the ideal consists in the blending of realiiy with imagination, in the marriage of the muscular, central man with the fecund woman who symbolizes imagination. Imagination is thus a presence. As Baird observes, "There are examples of a constantly accreting brilliance of tribute to the presence. One reads them feeling, as he goes, the masculine presence in central man. Generation to generation, this is the deathless dominion of the human power to imagine a world above the world, the unreal over the real. In a fulfilment as old as humanity itself, the presences in union and in consummation make together the children of the artist. the one without the other would be as nothing. To return to the young Stevens of the journal: "So if I had had that noble lady, I should have been content. The absence of her made the stealthy shadows dingy, atticy—incomplete." The noble lady in question is the consort of the imagination, the woman that had had more babies than one, unlike the universal machine which has only one baby-that is, which produces nothing but a monotonous repetition.

3. EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Section 1

The poem begins with a third person, an acrobat, who was sitting on the bank of the sea and observing the waves as they rose and swelled, struck against the bank, with their first line touching the beach. Again this process was repeated. The tide began to

rise and swell, the first line glittered as it approached the bank and then after striking and creating foam it subsided, as the skrit of a dancer first flings round and then settles down. The acrobat watched this happen everyday. Because of their repetitive motions, the waves looked quite mechanical. There was no change in their regular pattern. They did not stop but went on and on in the same rhythmic motion, repeating themselves time and time again, so that they looked like a "repetition, repeated continually." This makes the acrobat believe that this universal machine, the reality of nature as it is, has only one baby. That is to say, its products are repetitious and mechanical. So the acrobat thinks of another woman who has had more babies than that. These children of this fecund woman, which is Stevens' symbol for the highly fertile imagination, need more than a mere mechanical repetition. For their mother, the imagination, is not the mother of repetitious landscapes and seascapes, but the mother of those children who have in themselves the potential to question the value of a meaningless repetetion that goes on in the physical world. When they sit by the side of the sea, the very mechanical movement of the monotonous waves makes them think of the products which are full of beauty and variety. Thus perceiving the repetitious working of the universal machine, the reality of the physical world, the acrobat, the poet-persona, felt the need for a thesis which would synthesize the physical world with that of imagination.

Section 2

The second section demonstrates the thesis the acrobat, or the poet-persona, requires at the end of the first section. He thinks of a cradle-song ("nerceuse" which would carry him across the Atlantic). He thinks of the children of that fecund mother (imagination) who are men, even old men, who think of the central man (for Stevens the central man combines reality and imagination). He finds them all breathed into by the maternal care of their mother. In other words they are the people inspired by imagination. They are children, adult and old men, all hearing the voice of their mother. Their self is a repository of all remembered sounds, desires and imaginings. They have the capacity to express their desires and to seek their objects. All these people are haunted by that maternal voice. They transcend the universal machine of mere repetitions, which repeat themselves continually. They need a fiery lullaby, an imaginative song to satisfy their curiosity. In short, human being need something much more than the physical world which is but part of the universal machine. They need imagination to transform the reality they see around.

Section 3

The last section comes as the coda or a conclusion. The poet first envisions this fecund mother, the consort of the imagination, as

standing like a huge presence on the marble rocks. Her eyes might be the chinks where the sparrows build their nests. But imagination is not a static thing. It is more than a marble head. She is to be found in the crackling summer night, in the Dufts of towns, by the side of a window, by the side of a lamp, in a day of the week, and the winter season which precedes the spring. She can be found in the manner of people's walking, in the yellow fruit, in a house and even in a street. Her presence, though unseen, is like a supernatural presence which haunts every place. Even when she speaks ordinary words, these words are transformed into something much higher, and she is the elixir, the life-giving principle that sustains the human world. In short, imagination is all pervasive. No aspect of human life remains untouched by this unseen and almost supernatural presence. It transforms reality into something beautiful and lovable. The last section of the poem is thus a final apotheosis of imagination into an almost supernatural presence. It needs to be noted, however, that Stevens does not invest imagination with any supernatural meaning. It is like a supernatural presence, but not a supernatural presence. In this respect, Stevens' theory of imagination differs from that of the romantics who elevated poetic imagination to the level of supernatural and divine inspiration.

38. DANCE OF THE MACABRE MICE

Introduction

"Dance of the Macabre Mice" is Wallace Stevens' "Ozymandias" for like Shelley's well-known poem, this one also laughs at the vanity of seeking immortality through posthumous statues and monuments. Belong to the "Idea of Orders" group of poems, this small poem shows the contrast between the great man whose statue is referred to and the dance of the mice on and around this statue. Like the "worms at the gates of Heaven, the mice are the personae describing their macabre dance and the glory that belonged to the statue's original.

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The first stanza of the poem describes the time and the situation: the land of turkeys in turkey weather. There is a huge statue carrying with it its beautiful history as well as beautiful surprise—the history comes from the great contribution that the original of the statue made to the freedom movement of the country, and the surprise comes from the way the mice look at the statue! The statesman in the statue is on horseback. The rider and the horse are dead, but the mice dancing on the back of this horse are real enough.

The second stanza describes the movement of the mice on and around the statue. This dance, say the macabre mice, has no name except that it is the dance of hungry mice who are looking for food. Dancing, the mice go up to the tip of the hero's sword and around the rhetorical language of the inscription which is as musical as the sounds produced by tambourines and zithers in combination.

The inscription on the base of the statue says that it is the statue of the founder of the state. The mice then mock the claim of founding a free state for, according to them, no state can be bree in the middle of winter from the dance of the hungry mice. The coloured and towering tableau and the outstretched arm of the bronze statue are supposedly proof against all evil. But the fact that the mice dance around freely makes a mockery of this claim.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

"Dance of the Macabre Mice" is a satire on the vanity of human claims and ambitions. Like Shelley's well-known "Ozymandias, the poem laughs at the claims of posthumous tribute in the form of statues and historical monuments. Death is the ultimate reality and once a man, even if he is a great statesman or national hero, dies, he becomes prey to the kind of treatment which the mice extend to the statue in the poem.

The poem is built on the contrast between the huge statue of a great man and the small mice. The statue is huge, dignified, and well-decorated. The bronze arms are outstretched, apparently carrying a message of freedom. The mice, on the other hand, are small, petty creatures. But whereas the man is dead, the mice are alive, moving and dancing. Again, if the hero's hunger for posthumous fame is partly fulfilled by the statue, the reality of the hunger of the mice is a stark fact. It is through this contrast that Stevens brings home the message of the poem.

EXPLANATION WITH REFERENCE TO THE CONTEXT

1. In the land of turkeys in turkey weather
 At the base of the statue, we go round and round.
 What a beautiful history, beautiful surprise!
 Monseiur is on horseback. The horse is covered with mice.

Reference to the Context—This is the opening stanza of Stevens' satiric poem "Dance of the Macbre Mice." In this stanza, Stevens describes the initial situation—the huge bronze statue and the mice engaged in dancing on and around it.

Explanation—The statue is situated in the land of the turkeys. The weather is very cold because it is the season of winter. The

mice, full of hunger, have come out of their holes and are looking for food. They come to the base of the huge statue, the statue of some national hero who gloriously fought for the freedom of the country. Looking for food, the mice dance on and around the statue. They are surprised at the beauty of the huge statue as well as by the history which led to the making of this statue. The man, the original of the statue, is on horseback. The mice dance on this horseback and in a way become one with the national hero.

Critical Comments—This stanza brings out the initial contrast between the lifeless statue and the live, though hungry, mice dancing on the statue. The beautiful history and the beautiful surprise involve the dignity of the statue as contrasted with how the mice treat it.

2. This dance has no name. It is a hungry dance.
We dance it out to the tip of Monsieur's sword,
Reading the lordly language of the inscription,
Which is like zithers and tambourines combined:

Reference to the Context—These lines form the second stanza of Wallace Stevens's "Dance of the Macabre Mice." After describing the basic contrast between the huge but lifeless statue of a national hero and the live and moving, though hungry mice on and around this statue, the personae the macabre mice, describe their dance.

Explanation—The personae, the macabre mice, say that their dance has no name. It is a movement of the hungry mice, moving on and around, to and fro on the statue in search of food. In the process they climb up to the tip of the sword the statue is holding in its hand. Then they pass on to the dignified and rhetorical language of the inscription which describes the original of the statue and serves as an epitome of his achievements. The dignified style of the inscription shows a combination of harmony and rhythm as though it combined the music of zithers with the rhythm of tambourines.

Critical Comments—The irony, however, shatters the lordly language of the inscription describing the name of the original of the statue and the achievements that he made during his life-time. The commentators on his achievements are now the macabre mice who move irreverently from one corner of the statue to the other. The tip of the hero's sword may have frightened many a tough warriors, but now it cannot frighten even the petty mice! The alluded to inscription thus mocks the huge statue much in the same way that the words written on the pedestal of Ozymandias' statue in Shelley's poem mock the present condition of that huge statue in the desert.

3. The Founder of the State. Whoever founded
A state that was free, in the dead of winter, from mice?
What a beautiful tableau tinted and towering,
The arm of bronze outstretched against all evil!

Reference to the Context—This is the concluding stanza of Wallace Stevens' "Dance of the Macabre Mice." Having raised sufficient curiosity about identity of the original of the statue in the two preceding stanzas, Stevens now refers to him as the Founder of the State.

Explanation—This stanza indirectly names the original of the statue. It is the statue of the national hero (George Washington?) who founded the state and brqught liberty and freedom to it. But the second line immediately mocks the claim: There is hardly any state which can be free from the mice in the middle of a severe winter! Ironically, again, the beautiful sculpture of the bronze arm which is outstretched looks ridiculous especially because it is meant to symbolize the protection against all evil. And yet the statue cannot protect itself from the tiny mice moving freely on and around this statue.

Critical Comments—This final stanza of "Dance of the Macabre Mice" sums up the irony which informs this poem's total structure. The Founder of the State is dead and the only thing which can bestow a temporary immortality on the original is not free from the menace of the mice in winter. The arm which is outstretched against all evil cannot protect itself from mice! The beautiful tableaux and the "lordly language" of the inscription look ridiculous in the face of the statue's helplessness vis-a-vis the tiny mice. The whole poem is thus on a mockery of human vanities, claims and pretensions.

39. A PRIMITIVE LIKE AN ORB

Introduction

"A Primitive Like an Orb" belongs to the "Auroras of Autumn" group of poems and like most poems in this collection expresses Wallace Stevens' concern with poetry. Genuine poetry, which Stevens preferred to call "central poetry," dealt with man's position in this world, reality and imagination. In the present poem too, Stevens tries to describe quintessential poetry more or less in Platonic terms without, of course, the transcendental element that characterizes Plato's theory of forms. The poem is divided into twelve stanzas of eight lines each, but as usual in Stevens, the movement from one stanza to another is unhampered.

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The poem begins with its main concern—the "essential poem" at the centre of things. The first stanza concedes the point that quintessential poetry is to be found in the form of poems. It has the same relation with individual poems as the soul has with the body. Just as the soul is manifest in the living body and its vital functions, the quintessential poem is found in the songs and verses which spiritual fiddlings make. One cannot prove the existence of the central poem except through individual poems. It informs the being of a poem and yet remains unseen and is therefore a difficult mental appreciation.

Nevertheless, the central poetry is something which has got to do with both ideas and feelings, both combined as one. It requires a mixed perception — that of the imagination, feelings, and ideas. Lovers, believers and poets, whom Stevens describes as clairvoyant men, almost intuitively see the essential poem. They experience the joy of the language when it is themselves. With central poetry at the heart of things they find everything transformed to a sublime reality: the used-to earth, the used-to sky, the used-to clouds and used-to trees undergo a metamorphosis. The central poem then merges with the reality of the world as though it did not have a separate existence:

> And the world the central poem, each one the mate
> Of the other, as if summer was a spouse,
> Espoused each morning, each long afternoon,
> And the mate of summer: her mirror and her look,
> Her only place and person, a self of her
> That speaks. . . .

The central poetry, according to Stevens, informs everything in the world. It is the poem of the whole, of the composition of the whole, of the composition of the sea and the sky, and it is the essential compact of the parts. Vested in the serious folds of majesty, moving around and behind, it is a source of pleasant outbursts on the ear. It is a giant, an abstraction given head, a giant on the horizon, with a massive body and a definition which is not too exactly labelled. It is a presence that the lover writes about, the believer hears, the poet mumbles and the painter sees in the forms he paints. It is present in the skeleton of the other, the total of letters, prophecies, clods of colour the giant of nothingness. It is present in all such things and is still capable of changing and of living in the midst of all change.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The title of the poem suggests what Stevens means by central poetry. Stevens always uses "primitive" to indicate the natural

sources of vitality and insight which are suppressed by the academic and the insistently rational. It signifies the triumph of the imagination's goal of operation. In this sense its opposition to the academic and conventional is almost rhetorical. But, as Marius Bewley has pointed out, since the 'primitive' of the title aims at achieving an imaginative unity in diversity, at seeing the wholeness behind each fragment of experience, it is a primitive shaped like an orb. And the 'orb' is nothing less than the age-old circle of perfection which can be symbolized even in a little drop of dew, of which Marvell wrote:

. . . the clear Region where 'twas born
Round in itself encloses:
And in its little Globes extent
Frames as it can its native Element.

The image of the giant that Stevens uses subsequently in the poem is suggestive of pure reality which has be mastered by the poetic imagination. By this giant, Stevens means very much the same thing as in his declaration of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

We seek
The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object
At the exactest point at which it is itself,
Transfixing by being purely what it is,
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,
The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek
Nothing beyond reality.

This giant has thus to be mastered and purified by imagination so that it becomes the central poetry that Stevens speaks of in "A Primitive Like an Orb.". His concept of central poetry, it is to be noted, equates it with the best in all arts, humanistic disciplines, religion and prophecy. It is a kind of Platonic form without, of course, the transcendental element that Plato associated with forms. Central poetry partakes of reality, is present underneath all reality and also manifested through it.

Central poetry is born of a complete synthesis of imagination and reality, reason and intuition, the spirit of the physical form. It mingles with the world and is present in it, so that it cannot be seen independently of the objects in which it exists. It is like the soul which gives animation and significance to the body. It is man made and yet a giant that dominates the whole surrounding. It is the airy nothing that Shakespeare spoke of in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and yet it is capable of change. In this respect, Stevens

repeats his idea about the supreme fiction as expressed in his "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" : poetry must be abstract; it must change; and it must give pleasure. Central poetry is thus a supreme fiction, a fiction based on reality because it synthesizes imagination, reality and the perception of reality through imagination. Seen thus, Stevens' concept of central poetry is, as Marjorie Buhr puts it, an "ontological expression of the twentieth century's effort to find a meaningful substitute for a religious tradition which has lost its vitality." Sister M. Bernetta Ouinn has also emphasized that for Stevens poetry is a force which joins the objective and the subjective world and connects the realms of imagination and reality, thereby creating one realm of resemblance. This is quite true because, for Stevens, the poetic process transforms the reality of chaos into a supreme fiction, thus creating a central poetry in which the poet's powers of imagination allow insights into reality and place the poet as a central creative consciousness. "A Primitive Like an Orb" aptly demonstrates Stevens' concern with this central poetry, the supreme fiction.

EXPLANATIONS WITH REFERENCE TO THE CONTEXT

1. It is
As if the central poem became the world,
And the world the central poem, each one the mate
Of the other, as if summer was a spouse,
Espoused each morning, each long afternoon,
And the mate of summer: her mirror and her look,
Her only place and person, a self of her
That speaks, denouncing separate selves, both one.

Reference to the Context—These lines occur in Wallace Stevens' "A Primitive Like an Orb," a poem which explains Stevens' concern with central poetry. For Stevens a complete perception is that which partakes of the synthesis of the subjective and the objective, the imagination and the reality. As in "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" the book, the reader, and the night become one, in the given lines of the present poem the central poem, which Stevens also calls supreme fiction elsewhere, becomes one with the perceived world, the objective reality.

Explanation—When imagination interacts with the objective world, it so transforms the objective reality that it is hard to distinguish between the subjective and the objective. As the sound of the sea and the music of the solitary girl synthesize into a higher music in "The Idea of Order at Key West," the world and the central poem become one. Each is the mate of the other. Using the image of the spouse, the poet describes the central poetry as informing and mingling with the reality, so that the world becomes her mirror and her look, her only place and person. The two

selves combine to create a new and higher reality which is neither sucjective nor objective but is instead a supreme fiction.

Critical Comments—This stanza succinctly puts forward Stevens' views on the synthesis of reality and imagination which in his opinion create the central poetry, the supreme fiction. When the subjective and the objective selves combine, a new poetry, a central poetry is born which transforms the objective world into a higher reality. This central poetry is an abstraction and yet it is capable of both changing itself and adjusting itself to the phenomenon of change that characterizes the physical world. The lines thus re-emphasize Stevens three characteristics of central poetry; it must be abstract, it must change, and must give pleasure.

2. Here, then, is an abstraction given head,
A giant on the horizon, given arms,
A massive body and long legs, stretched out,
A definition with an illustration, not
Too exactly labelled, a large among the smalls
Of it, a close, parental magnitude,
At the centre of the horizon, concentrum, grave
And prodigious person, patron of origins.

Reference to the Context—These lines form the penultimate stanza of Wallace Stevens' "A Primitive Like an Orb". This poem, like "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" expresses Stevens' concern with what he calls a central poetry or supreme fiction. The given stanza suggests the archetypal nature of the central abstraction underlying supreme fiction with the image of a giant or monster, dominating the objective world.

Explanation—Central poetry, like supreme fiction, is for Stevens an abstraction. For the sake of clarity, however, he conceives of it as a giant or a monster that bestrides the horizon, with his massive bcdy and long legs and stretched arms. The monster defies all definition except through illustration, much in the same way that the image of the giant is itself an illustration for the dominating nature of central poetry. Central poetry is archetypal in that it informs all poems and yet remains above them. It remains at the centre of the objective world, its fine arts and humanistic disciplines, and is the cause of the origin of all poetic patterns.

Critical Comments—Using the image of a giant for central poetry, an image which has been used by other poets as well, Stevens suggests how central and vital his supreme fiction really is. The central poetry is present in all good poems and is yet above all of them individually and collectively. It is like a giant striding bestriding the whole horizon and yet remaining invisible. Never-

theless it is present as are archetypes in all the fictions that mankind creates.

3. The lover writes, the believer hears,
The poet mumbles and the painter sees,
Each one, his fated eccentricity,
As a part, but part, but tenacious particle,
Of the skeleton of the either, the total
Of letters, prophecies, perceptions, clods,
Of colour, the giant of nothingness, each one
And the giant ever changing, living in change.

Reference to the Context—These lines are taken from the final stanza of Wallace Stevens "A Primitive Like an Orb," a poem which expresses Stevens' concern with supreme fiction. Stevens has devoted many poems to his concept of poetry which, broadly speaking, is a fiction derived from a synthesis of imagination, reality and the perception of this reality. In the present stanza Stevens broadens his concept of central poetry and equates it with a kind of platonic form in forming all arts, humanistic disciplines, and the objective reality of the observed phenomena.

Explanation—Central poetry is the concrete, though invisible abstraction which informs love, poetry, painting and even belief. The poet, the lover, the believer, and the painter, each of them perceives central poetry in his own way, but each feels it presence. Each of them sees it as a part of the imagination, a part of all literature, prophecy, and perception, colour and form. Each recognizes the nature of this "airy nothing" as Shakespeare described it in his "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Each recognizes that this abstraction, like the stone in Yeat's "Easter 1916," is in the midst of all life in flux. It is a part of flux and yet above it, for ever changing and adjusting itself to all change.

Critical Comments—This final stanza of "A Primitive Like an Orb" provides a broad-based view of Stevens' concept of supreme fiction or central poetry. It is the archetypal experience underlying all literature, painting, music, love, and religion. For common to religious believer, poets, lovers, and painters is the metamorphosis of reality with the help of imagination. Stevens here presents central poetry as the first principle underlying all human experience, arts, and humanistic disciplines. For him this central poetry is the archetype underlying all perceived reality, but a reality which is for ever changing.

40. ESTHETIQUE DU MAL

Introduction

Wallace Stevens did not believe in God, heaven, hell and afterlife. Nor did he subscribe to the Christian concept of evil, suffering and pain. For a true Christian, the evil in the world is due to man's inherited sin as well as his being subject to temptation by the metaphysical forces of evil embodied in Satan. Nevertheless, Stevens recognized that pain, suffering and evil were very much part of this world and human life. His "Esthetique du Mal" (Aesthetics of Evil) is a part poetic and part philosophical statement regarding the existence of pain and evil in the world.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE POEM

This sixteen-stanza long poem opens with a concrete example of impersonal pain and evil in the world. Stevens refers to a poet witnessing the eruption of a volcano in Vesuvius. As a poet, this Spaniard could describe the terror of the sound which was so much near him geographically and yet so ancient. To describe the havoc caused by the month-long volcanic fire, he tried to remember the traditional phrases: "Pain audible at noon, pain...killing pain on the very point of pain." The volcano was trembling as the human body trembles near death. His book took exact note of the catastrophe caused by the volcano. It seemed that the volcano might consume the earth in solid fire and be aware of no pain of the victim. But this pain, Stevens argues, is part of the sublime, from which we shrink. What is more, pain is indifferent to the sky. The moon went on shining as usual and the volcanic fire remained equally indifferent to the moon.

If human beings philosophize about and erect huge structures of mythologies around pain and evil, it is because they have conceived of God in human terms. The problem perhaps lies with this concept of an over-human, pitiful God; otherwise, the health of this world might be enough to compensate for the evil and pain that we find a part of life. The whole concept of evil is man-made:

> He is
> That evil, that evil in the self, from which
> In desperate hollow, rugged gesture, fault
> Falls out on everything: the genius of
> The mind, which is our being, wrong and wrong,
> The genius of the body, which is our world,
> Spent in the false engagements of the mind.

In other words, it is the human concept of pain and evil which has led mankind to conceive of a human god and of numerous theological and interpretations for the phenomenon of evil in the world.

Otherwise, there is plenty of warmth, love and even bliss in the physical world. Even minute phrases first spoken by the lips and then concretized by our senses mean more than "clouds, benevolences, distant heads." These are the things with which we once vested golden forms. By associating evil, pain and suffering with Satan, people created mythologies which have become a burden on them.

When the Spaniard filled with such nostalgic thoughts the thing that assured him was the fecund reality, which Stevens presents as "the softest woman with a vague moustache and not the mauve Maman." He felt the force of reality, understood how the indifferent chantings of the crickets had its own music as contradistinguished from the incantations of mythologies. He now realized that "he might suffer or that he might die was the innocence of living, if life itself was innocent." And it was such thoughts that disentangled him from sleek consolations which he sought from outmoded and outdated philosophies and mythologies.

Stevens then urges us to accept life with all its realities, joys as well as sorrows; for "life is a bitter aspic (a sweet bitter meal)." The paratroopers fall and as they fall they mow the lawn. Similarly, a ship sinks, a volcano erupts and takes a big toll of human lives. But all this is a part of life. Evil, poverty, pain and suffering are a part of the human lot but then there is also the compensation which comes through the gaiety of language, the imagination which transforms reality for us:

Natives of poverty, children of malheur,
The gaiety of language is our seigneur.

Pain and evil are so much a part of our existence that we despise what would be a well-made scene.

Stevens then moves on to the interaction of the subjective and the objective. A man in a peopled world feels alone because of his pre-conceived notions about people. A man in an unpeopled world becomes aware of his loneliness. It is only in a third world that the human mind accepts whatever is true, and this truth accepts pain and evil as part of human life. The problem comes when we are guided either by a host of mythologies by one-sided logic. As an example, Stevens mentions the one-sided logic of a revolutionary, Konstantinov. Such people are the lunatics of one idea in a world of ideas, who would have all the people live, work, suffer and die in that idea in a world of ideas. For this reason, such extreme of logic would be illogical. The greatest poverty (for human beings) is to ignore the physical world. The pity is that we are so much obsessed with another world and another life that we make a non-sense of the actual world in which we live. Any paradise that we must create must be made out of this earth and this-worldly reality:

And out of what one sees and hears and out
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
So many selves, so many ensuous worlds,
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
With the metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we live.

CRITICAL COMMENTS

"Esthetique du Mal" (Aesthetics of Evil) is Stevens' poetic statement of his theory of evil in this world. Since Stevens did not believe in any religion, mythology and God, but only in the great power of imagination, an imagination interacting with and transforming perceived reality, he urges us not to philosophize or mythologize evil, pain, and suffering. We explain evil away by associating it with Satan or with man's inherent sin. But, according to Stevens, evil is as much part of our existence as are the charms, joys, and pleasures of living in this world in this very life.

Stevens does not deny the existence of evil, pain and suffering; rather, he accepts them as part of this earthly existence. A volcano erupts and takes a heavy toll of human lives; a ship sinks in the waves of the sea, killing many sailors and passengers; paratroopers fall and die. But instead of accepting all such painful experiences as part of our life, we try to sheathe them in some ensolacing mythology. This is why we create many myths about heaven and hell and invent a god who is like ourselves:

The fault lies with an over-human god,
Who by sympathy has made himself a man
And is not to be distinguished, when we cry

Because we suffer, our oldest parent, peer
Of the populace of the heart, the reddest lord,
Who has gone before us in experience.

By inventing thoughts of redemption in heaven and paradise, we tend to ignore this life and all its joys, as well as sorrows. But pain is a part of life. The soldier who gets a red wound in the war, gets it because he had life and blood in him: his wound is good because life was." So long as he lived, "no part of him was part of death." But by conceiving ideas of salvation and of a sympathetic god, we have destroyed the very belief that evil is itself a part of life:

The death of Satan was a tragedy
For the imagination. A capital
Negation destroyed him in his tenement
And, with him, many blue phenomena.

Stevens also joins issue with all ameliorative mythologies. By citing the example of a volcano, which in fact forms background of the poem, he refers to the indifference of the world and gods to our pain. Soldiers die but the crickets continue to chant indifferently. There is no revealed plan which governs the universe. As he wrote in "Sunday Morning", and earlier in "Death of a Soldier," life goes on with all its joys. Why waste it with depressing thoughts of pain or with the consoling (and of course, false) thoughts of salvation in the next world? If people from another world, the non-physical people in a non-physical world (this is after all the concept of heaven in all religions) were to look at our physical world and our physical existence, they would envy our lot. Why not then accept pain, evil and suffering as features of our life and physical world and take life as a "bitter aspic"?

The poem is thus a typical Stevensian statement on his theory of evil and pain. It does not deny the existence of evil and suffering; what it does, instead, is to accept them as part of life, and not to think of ameliorative fictions about paradise and afterlife, a non-physical existence in a non-physical world.

EXPLANATIONS WITH REFERENCE TO THE CONTEXT

1. The fault lies with an over-human god,
Who by sympathy has made himself a man
And is not to be distinguished, when we cry
Because we suffer, our oldest parent, peer
Of the populace of the heart, the reddest lord,
Who has gone before us in experience.

Reference to the Context—These lines, extracted from Wallace Stevens's "Esthitique du Mal" (Aesthetics of Evil) blame the creation of an anthropomorphic god and the associated mythologies for many beliefs and myths. Stevens did not believe in God and religion and insisted on an acceptance of reality, a reality perceived through imagination.

Explanation—All thoughts of heaven and hell and mythologizing and philsophizing about evil, pain and suffering are attributable to the concept of an anthropomorphic god. People, in order to understand the phenomena of evil and pain, invented God, and invented him in a human image. Not only this, they attributed him with all human qualities including that of self-effacement and sacrifice for the sake of others. The implicit reference is to the myth of Christ, his pity for mankind, and his ultimate sacrifice for the redemption of the human race. The result of this mythologizing is that we attribute our suffering to the fall of Adam from paradise and the Christian theory of inherited sin. As a result, we make a mess of our life and fail to accept the reality of evil and pain in the world.

Critical Comments—The lines are a challenge to traditional mythologizing about the cause of human pain. Stevens turns the tables on theologies by saying that it was not God who made man in his own image; on the contrary, it is man who has conceived of God in his image! Finding it difficult to cope with the reality of suffering and pain, people invented a human god who would pity their lot and sacrifice himself for their sake. But this belief has become a burden today because most of the time it acts as an anti-life and anti-this-world force. That is to say, we lose sight of the physical reality and seek false ensolacing from myths, thereby making a mess of our present joy in the process.

2. Life is a bitter aspic. We are not
At the centre of a diamond. At dawn,
The paratroopers fall and as they fall
They mow the lawn. A vessel sinks in waves
Of people, as big bell-billows from its bell
Bell-bellow in the village steeple.

Reference to the Context—These lines present Stevens' views on life as expressed in his well-known poem "Esthetique du Mal" (Aesthetics of Evil). People have woven huge fabrics of myths and ideas about heaven, paradise and hell to explain the existence of evil, pain and suffering in the world. But Stevens thinks otherwise. Being an atheist and hedonist, he insists on an acceptance of this life, with its joys as well as sorrows, and a rejection of heaven, hell and after-life.

Explanation—Comparing life with a bitter-sweet meal (a bitter aspic, as he calls it), Stevens says that joys and sorrows are part of human life. We are not at the centre of this earth, but part of it. No theorizing about the phenomenon of pain and evil can explain certain harsh realities. At dawn the paratroopers fall and die. A ship sinks, taking a heavy toll of people. What the religious-minded people do is to have prayers for them in the church and to say that they have died for a cause. This is not indeed so, for there is hardly any ameliorative pattern in life. All we can do is to accept death, pain and suffering as part of life and face this harsh reality, rather than seek refuge in religious and philosophical fictions.

Critical Comments—These lines provide a key to Stevens' concept of pain and death in the world, though many critics have found fault with what they call his irreverent and sardonic humour, especially in the example of the paratroopers. The fact is that Stevens wants us to believe in the reality of our existence which is, as he put it in "Sunday Morning", living in the ' old chaos of the sun." Religious thoughts about the meaning of life, the reality of a heaven and benevolent god, are all false. Worse yet, belief in these things makes us ignore this life and this world. We must remember that

pain is human and so is death. If a soldier dies in a war, he dies because he lived. In other words even death is a part of life and we must accept it.

3. Perhaps,
After death, the non-physical people in paradise,
Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe
The green corn gleaming and experience
The mirror of what we feel. The adventurer
In humanity has not conceived of a race
Completely physical in a physical world.

Reference to the Context—These lines, taken from Wallace Stevens' "Esthetique du Mal" (Aesthetics of Evil) satirize the traditional attitudes, even as they advance his own theory of the reality of the present world, present life with all its joys and sorrows.

Explanation—Satirizing those who reject the present world in search for a paradise, Stevens says that we human beings somehow ignore the beauty, richness and complexity of our physical world. Absorbed in our thoughts about salvation, paradise and God, we forget that we are physical people living in a physical world. Ironically, he says, perhaps it would require the non-physical people living in a non-physical paradise to recognize the beauty and richness that characterize our physical life and world. As for human beings, they have made many adventures but have not somehow conceived of a life in a world which is purely sensuous and physical. This, says Stevens, is a pity, because the world has so much to offer us.

Critical Comments—These satirical lines aptly present Stevens' attitude towards those who reject this life and the world. An atheist and hedonist, Stevens believed that there was no after-life and no paradise. Both, according to him, are inventions of the human mind. This is why, as he put it in "Sunday Morning," the heavenly paradise, as conceived by people, looks like a copy of the earthly paradise. In this poem, Stevens repeats the idea by saying that people have ignored their physical existence in a physical world so much so that perhaps only some non-existent creatures living in a non-existent paradise can understand and appreciate the beauty, richness and complexity that belong to our physical existence in a physical world. □

is but a part of it, so is death. If a soldier dies in a war, he dies because he lived. In other words even death is a part of life and we must accept it.

Passage

After death, the non-physical people in paradise,
Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe
The green corn gleaming and experience
The minor of what we feel. The adventurer
In humanity has not conceived of a race
Completely physical in a physical world.

Reference to the Context—These lines, taken from Wallace Stevens' "Esthétique du Mal" ("Aesthetics of Evil") satirize the traditional attitudes, which as they advance their own theory of the reality of the present world, present life with all its joys and sorrows.

Explanation—Satirizing those who reject the present world in favour of a paradise, Stevens says that we human beings somehow ignore the beauty, richness and complexity of our physical world, absorbed as our thoughts are about salvation, paradise and God. We forget that we are physical people living in a physical world. Ironically, it would require the non-physical people in paradise, perhaps, to recognize the beauty and richness of this non-physical paradise and our physical life and world. As for human beings, they have sought many adventures but have not somehow conceived of a race in a world which is purely sensuous and physical. This, says Stevens, is a pity, because the world has so much to offer us.

Critical Comments—The sentiments in these lines are typical of Stevens' attitude. Stevens was a poet who did not reject this life and the world. An atheist and sceptic, Stevens believed that there was no after-life and no paradise. Both, according to him, are inventions of the human mind. That's why, as he put it in "Sunday Morning," the heavenly paradise, as conceived by people, looks like a copy of this earthly paradise. In this poem, Stevens repeats the idea by saying that people have ignored their physical nature and the physical world so much so that, perhaps, only some non-physical creatures living in a non-physical paradise can understand and appreciate the beauty, richness and complexity that belong to our physical existence in a physical world.

QUESTIONS AND THEIR MODEL ANSWERS

Questions and Their Model Answers

Q. 1. Write a brief essay on Wallace Stevens' concept of order. Illustrate from the poems which deal with this concept.

Ans. Wallace Stevens shared with many modern poets and thinkers Nietzsche's famous declaration that "God is dead" and that "error is a condition of knowing and feeling". But like them, he also felt the need for evolving a new, secular order having its sources in man himself and the reality of his experiences. This is why in three of his collections after the early *Harmonium*—*Ideas of Order* (1936), *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937) and *Parts of a World* (1942) — Stevens is concerned with the evolution of an imagination poetic order which relates man to his world and at the same time takes into account the process, the principle of change, that governs the reality of this world as perceived by man.

Stevens begins the quest for a new imaginative order by questioning the relevance of the existing orders provided by traditional religion, metaphysics, philosophy and political theories. Unlike Yeats of "Sailing to Byzantium," Stevens finds neither consolation nor enlightenment from the monuments of unaging intellect. The ancient myth about the sun-god is a solar-junk and must, therefore, be discarded. In his opinion, as Marie Borroff presents it, "Past as foisted upon the present is suffocating and stultifying; our veneration of it is the object of Stevens' constant and endlessly resourceful attack. It is labelled 'history,' 'doctrine,' 'definitions,' 'the rotted named'; it is a garbage dump, a junk shop, a theatre beaten in by a tempest in which the audience continues to sit; it is the second-rate statuary on savings banks, the equestrian statues in public squares, the vested interests of the academies and the museums". His "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" mocks metaphysicians and religious preachers who are slaves of their own words:

They preach and they are preaching in a land
To be described. They are preaching in a time
To be described. Evangelists of what?
If they could gather their theses into one,
Collect their thoughts together into one,
Into a single thought. . . .

But obviously they cannot. Stevens rejects Christianity on moral, religious and intellectual grounds in many of his poems because it teaches adherence to an order which, according to him, is no longer relevant. In "Sunday Morning" he finds fault with the Christian lady's ideas of "imperishable bliss"; in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman", he equates the nave of her haunted heaven with a peristyle from which is projected a bawdy masque; in "Esthetique du Mal," he goes much farther and says,

The fault lies with an over-human god,
Who by sympathy has made himself a man
And is not to be distinguished, when we cry

Because we suffer. . . .

A too, too human god, self-pity's kin
And uncourageous genesis.

Sometimes even the traditional ideas of patriotism are handled somewhat causally as in the same poem:

The paratroopers fall and as they fall
They mow the lawn.

Political ideas, particularly Marxist, are the subject of a more vehement attack in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue". Stevens rejects all these inherited orders because they are barrier to man's perception of reality afresh. The order that he conceives is born of a fusion of the imagination and reality, and it is essentially secular, poetic and imaginative.

An early quest for a new imaginative order figures, though somewhat sketchily, in "Sunday Morning" in which the poet provides an alternative to traditional Christianity:

Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings is loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch
These are the measures destined for her soul.

In this new order, which arises out of man's contact with nature, the sun, shorn of earlier myths about him, will be central figure, "not as god, but as a god might be." The woman is advised to practise a complete identification of the self with the natural landscape. In the last stanza Stevens suggests that we are alone on the earth and there is no bengin spirit watching over us. The only order is found is the order of nature and we must enjoy its beauty:

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

But this is still an external, though real order, that one finds in nature and is advised to identify oneself with. In "Anecdote of the Jar", "Stevens goes much farther and suggests that whatever order prevails in this world of nature exists more in the human mind than the world that the mind sees. The bare and barren jar imposes order on the slovenly wilderness as soon as it is placed atop a hill in Tennessee:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surrounded the hill.

Though the jar lacked the life and fecundity that the Tennessee wildernesses possessed, yet it took dominion everywhere:

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

Stevens' still maturer ideas on order, however, appear in "The Idea of Order at Key West" in which the solitary singer's music imposes an order on the chaotic, meaningless sounds of the sea:

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

After the song of the girl had finished and the poet and his friend decided to return to the city, the lights on the fishing boat gave order to that vastness, the sea:

> Oh! blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
> The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
> Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
> And of ourselves and of our origins,
> In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

As Geoffrey Moore comments, "This is Stevens' intimation of a sublime simplicity—order out of very fortuitousness. Through the poem we may reach order, and if that sounds a feeble gesture in the face of a world of violence and catastrophes, we should remember that for Stevens the significance of poetry was second to none." In support of his view, Moore then cites Stevens' own remarks about the kind of order human mind can create through poetry:

> The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary. These alternatives probably mean the same thing, but the intention is not to foster a cult. The knowledge of poetry is a part of philosophy, and a part of science; the import of poetry is the import of the spirit.

It is thus the voice of poetry, of imagination, that orders the chaos, and gives a hitherto unperceived intensity to experience. In the words of Daniel Fuchs, "The imaginative order of poetry is one which yields meaning and beauty; it is that violence from within that protects us from the violence without. . . . The peculiar magic of the imagination is that, through it, life's dimensions become more specific while becoming more mysterious."

Stevens recognizes that the kind of order the girl's music can impose on the world around her, or the jar in Tennessee wildernesses, is essentially transient and changing. But that is in the nature of the reality of the world which is itself in a state of flux. This is why old static orders may have had their relevance at a given time, but now they have become outdated. The fact is recognized in both "The Connoisseur of Chaos" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction". In the former, the connoisseur of chaos finds an order which is based on a law of inherent opposites. Like the eagle "For which the intricate Alps are a single nest," the connoisseur is a master of complexity, a complexity that arises out

of the combination of the opposites. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" the order that Stevens looks for must make sense of the opposites in nature:

> Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
> And forth the particulars of rapture come.
> Music falls on the silence like a sense,
> A passion that we feel, not understand.

But what is necessary to observe such an order, says Stevens, is a complete identification of the mind with the world it perceives. As he says in "The Snow Man" one must have a mind of winter if one wants to behold "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." The point is forcefully repeated in "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand."

> The soul, he said, is composed
> Of the external world.
>
> There are men of the East, he said,
> Who are the East.
> There are the men of a province
> Who are that province.
> There are men of a valley
> Who are that valley.

Since poets and artists succeed in identifying themselves with the world they talk about; the order they impose is a relevant and meaningful order, no matter how transient it is. This is why Stevens praises poets as makers of supreme fictions whereby they create a new world, a new order in it:

> What makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which are unable to conceive of it (*The Necessary Angel*, p. 31).

Q. 2. Discuss the theme of imagination and reality in the poetry of Wallace Stevens.

Ans. Please see Chapter 5 entitled "Stevens' Theory of Imagination and Reality" in the INTRODUCTION.

Q. 3. Write why you would or would not consider Wallace Stevens a romantic. Illustrate your answer from the poems you have read.

Or

Q. 4. Despite his attack on romantics, Stevens is himself a "romantic, himself a chauvinist of the self." Discuss.

Ans. Please see INTRODUCTION, Chapter 4 entitled "Wallace Stevens' Affinities with Romantic Poets".

Q. 5. What is Stevens' theory of imagination? How does it compare and contrast with that of the British Romantics? Illustrate your argument from the poems prescribed for you.

Ans. See INTRODUCTION, Chapter 5 entitled "Stevens' Theory of Imagination and Reality."

Q. 6. In what respects is Stevens a representative modern poet? Discuss with reference to the poems you have read?

Or

Q. 7. The poetry of Stevens, according to J. V. Cunningham, provides a fine blending of the traditional and the modernist elements. Discuss this statement with reference to Stevens' poems prescribed for you?

Ans. Please see INTRODUCTION, Chapter 6 entitled, "Tradition and Modernity in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens."

Q. 8. Stevens has often been described as a dandy of poetry and his poetry as holiday poetry. Write why you would or would not support this view.

Ans. Please see INTRODUCTION, Chapter 3, "The Dandyism of Wallace Stevens."

Q. 9. Write a short essay on Wallace Stevens' wit and satire.

Or

Q. 10. What aspects of life does Stevens' poetry satirize?

Or

Q. 11. Stevens' wit and humour have often been described as Meredithian. Do you agree?

Ans. It was Wylie Sypher who first of all described Stevens' humour as essentially Meredithian: "Stevens is endowed, as Eliot with his chill humour is not, with the Meredithian comic spirit, a mocking awareness of our absurdities and our pretense. . . . The comedy. . . is ringing with the silver laughter of the Meredithian faun; eruptive images, riotous language, springing delight over the victim, the intellectual tensions of *The Egoist*. The moments of high comedy in 'Le Monocle' indicate how defensive are the ironies of Prufrock". The principal feature which unites Stevens' wit and humour with Meredithian spirit of comedy is a laughter of the mind, a civilizing intellectual laughter, a kind of laughter which, according to Meredith, is intended for "a cultivated society where

ideas are current, and perceptions quick." There is however, one important difference between Stevensian and Meredithian laughter: Meredith thought that "contempt is a sentiment which cannot be entertained by comic intelligence" and that "the laughter of comedy is impersonal and of unrivalled politeness," Stevens' wit often becomes subversive and even indecorous, depending on his attitude towards its targets.

Stevens is generally against old attitudes, old ideas, philosophies and theologies because he considers them a hindrance to man's fresh perception of reality. The old aristocratic taste, for example, is one of Stevens' targets. In "The Weeping Burgher" it is this aspect of the past which receives laughter because it is really ridiculous:

> Ah! that ill humours
> Should mask as white girls.
> And ah! that Scarmouche
> Should have a black barouche.
> The sorry verities!

In "Oak Leaves Are Hands," the lady is so much lost in the past that the family coat of arms is reduced by Stevens to a buglike apparition:

> MacMort she had been, ago.
> Twelve-legged in her ancestral hells,
> Weaving and weaving many arms.

In "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," Stevens attacks vehemently what may be called the "unaging monuments of intellect" :

> Messieurs,
> It is an artificial world. The rose
> Of paper is of the nature of the world.
> The sea is so many written words; the sky
> Is blue, clear, cloudly, high, dark, wide and round;
> The mountains inscribe themselves upon the walls.

As Marie Borroff comments, "The past as foisted upon the present is suffocating and stultifying; our veneration of it is the object of Stevens' constant and endlessly resourceful attack. It is labelled 'history', 'doctrine', 'definitions', 'the rooted names'; it is a garbage dump, a junk shop, a theatre beaten in by a tempest in which the audience continues to sit; it is the second-rate statuary on savings banks, the equestrian statues in public squares, the vested interests of the academies and the museums."

Old attitudes towards death and funeral are similarly questioned and satirized. In the early "Emperor of Ice-Cream" death is presented as an ordinary matter which cannot be allowed to interfere with life:

> If her horny feet protrude, they come
> To show how cold she is, and dumb.
> Let the lamp affix its beam
> . The only reality is the reality of ice-cream.

In "Cortege for Rosenbloom," Stevens' cariture of a funeral is at its irreverent best:

> Now, the wry Rosenbloom is dead
> And his finical carriers tread,
> On a hundred legs, the tread
> Of the dead.
> Rosenbloom is dead.

As Daniel Fuchs remarks, "The processional is buglike, the iterated rhyme a parody of that harmony which comes with final rest."

Stevens' is equally harsh on old images, old mythologics and metaphoric use of languages. Chieftain Iffucan in "Bantams in Pine-Woods" is a poet with traditional trappings, a heroic, pompous, official figure that casts its lengthy shadow of ten-foot poet on the existentialist inchlings:

> Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
> Of tan with henna heckles, halt!
>
> Damned universal cock, as if the sun
> Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.
>
> Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.
> Your world is you. I am my world.

For this reason Stevens satririzes the romantic use of both language and imagination. In "Delightful Evening," for example, he employs his deflationary wit to explode sentimental and cliched language and outmoded beliefs:

> A very felicitous eve,
> Herr Doktor, and that's enough,
> Though the brow in your palm my grieve
> At the vernacular of light. . .
>
> The spruces' outstretched hands;
> The twilight overfull
> Of wormy metaphors.

"The Creations of Sounds" similarly satirizes the romantic sentimentality:

If the poetry of X was music,
So that it came to him of its own.
Without understanding, out of the wall. . .

Tell X that speech is not dirty silence
Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier.
It is more than an imitation for the ear.

"The Man on the Dump" discards all old images and questions their relevance in the modern world:

The sun is corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche
Places there, a bouquet. Ho-ho. . .

The dump is full
Of images.

The following lines from this poem seem like a satiric go-over on Keats' famous "Ode to the Nightingale":

Did the Nightingale torture the ear,
Pack the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear
Solace itself in peevish birds? Is it peace,
Is it a philosopher's hone moon, one finds
On the dump?

Stevens also employs his deflationary wit against traditional metaphysicians, epistemologists and philosophers because, according to him, they provide unncessary barriers to our direct and fresh apprehension of reality. In "Metaphors of a Magnifico," he directs his attack against reasoning which is much less certain than the landscape it wishes to rationalize about:

Twenty men crossing a bridge
Into a village
Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
Into twenty villages,
Or one man
Crossing a single bridge into a village.

The rationalist scholars in their voluminous cloaks are a target in "Five Grotesque Pieces":

X understanding Aristotle
Instinctively, not otherwise
Hey-di-ho,

Lest wise men piece the world together with wisdom
Or poets with holy magic.
Hey-di-ho.

Similarly "Six Significant Landscapes" caricatures rationalists;

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling.
They confine themselves
To right-angled triangles.

Pedagogic style and traditional dialectic method are satirized with gusto in several poems, notably "The Glass of Water" and "The Connoisseur of Chaos". In "The Glass of Water," the traditional dialectician is lost in his method which prohibits him from seeing anything more than the glass visibly holds:

That the glass would melt in heat,
That the water would freeze in cold,
Shows that this object is merely a state,
One of many, between two poles. So,
In the metaphysical, there are these poles.

The traditional connoisseur of chaos is satisfied with a dialectic of opposites which, for him, provide "essential unity" :

If all the green of spring was blue, and it is;
If the flowers of South Africa were bright
On the tables of Connecticut, and they are;
If Englishmen lived without tea in Ceylon, and they do. . . .

Political ideas, especially Marxist, are the object of Stevens' satire in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" as well as in "Life on a Battleship". In the latter,

The captain said, "The war between classes is
A preliminary, provincial phase,
Of the war between individuals. In time,
When earth has become a paradise, it will be
A paradise full of assassins."

Here, Marx's dialectical materialism is skilfull converted into a dialectic of terror. In the former,

Everything is dead
Except the future. Always everything
That is dead except what ought to be.
All things destroy themselves or are destroyed.

For Stevens this vision of the future which the Marxist sees is no more than a "grubby faith."

Stevens employs a variety of satirical attitudes towards traditional Christianity. The attack goes on from the very early career

to the last poems because Stevens thinks that it is the dead ideas bequeathed by Christianity which are a hindrance to our enjoyment of this world and to the proper perception of present reality. In the early "Ploughing on Sunday", the day of rest and prayers, Stevens makes the point with a certain hilarity:

> Remus, blow your horn!
> I'm ploughing on Sunday,
> Ploughing North America.
> Blow your horn!

As Daniel Fuchs describes the mood of this poem, "It is irreverence being jubilant at its success." In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" the satire at traditional religiosity and puritanism becomes impolite and outrageous:

> Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,
> Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade,
> Proud of such novelties of the sublime, . . .
> May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves
> A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres.
> This will make widows wince. But fictive things
> Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.

In "Sunday Morning" the traditional paradise is rejected because it is not only moulded on the earthly paradise but, worse still, it lacks the principle of change that belong to the earth. "The Sense of the Sleight of Hand Man" begins with the same kind of satirical attack on puritanism that "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and "Doctor of Geneva" demonstrate:

> One's grand flights, one's Sunday baths,
> One's tootings at the weddings of the soul
> Occur as they occur.

"Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" is no less harsh on the lean cats of the arches of the churches:

> They preach and they are preaching in a land
> To be described. They are preaching in a time
> To be described. Evangelists of what?
> If they could gather their theses into one,
> Collect their thoughts together into one,
> Into a single thought. . . .

In "Negation," God is presented as a parody of the idea of omnipotence and omniscience:

Hi! the creator is blind,
Struggling toward his harmonious whole,
Rejecting intermediate parts,
Horrors and falsities and wrong;
Incapable master of all force,
Too vague idealist, overwhelmed
By an afflatus that persists.

Thus, there is hardly any aspect of ideas, traditional attitudes, beliefs, myths and superstitions that escapes Stevens' prancing comic spirit. Stevens attacks old fictions, theologies and metaphysics with his deflationary wit. The satire is not, however, a sheer delight at upsetting the applecart of traditional wisdom or belief; it is rather a means to make one face reality directly and without the aid of any received, inherited ideas. To face the reality of a winter landscape, one must have a mind of winter, a mind does not allow any traditional concepts of winter misery to interfere with present perception of a snowy landscape.

Q. 12. What is Stevens' concept of man?

Q 13. Write a short essay on Wallace Stevens' philosophy of life, stressing his viewpoint on man and on evil, transience and death.

Ans. For answers to Questions 12 and 13, please see INTRODUCTION, chapter 7, entitled "Wallace Stevens' World View."

Q. 14. What are the principal features of Wallace Stevens' poetry? Discuss with special reference to its gaudiness, delight in this world, and the problem of obscurity.

Q. 15. Wallace Stevens has been described as a poet of this world. Do you agree? What aspects of his poetry reveal his delight in the here and the now?

Ans. For answers to Questions 14 and 15, please see INTRODUCTION, Chapter 2 entitled "Principal Features of Stevens' Poetry."

Q. 16. What are the major themes of Wallace Stevens' poetry? Discuss with reference to the poems prescribed for you.

Ans. Please see INTRODUCTION, Chapter 5, "The Theme of Reality and Imagination" and also Chapter 7 entitled "Wallace Stevens' World View."

Q. 17. Compare and contrast the style of Stevens' early poetry with that of his later, meditative poetry.

Q. 18. How far would you support the view that Stevens' poetry has two styles, one gaudy and decorative and the other plain and meditative? Illustrate your answer from the poems you have read.

Q. 19. Write a short essay on Wallace Stevens' use of images and metaphors.

Ans. For answers to Questions 17, 18 and 19, see the relevant portions of chapter 8 "Poetic Techinque and Style" in the INTRODUCTION.

Q. 20. Discuss the view that for Stevens "actual poetry is the embodiment of a theory of poetry, and . . . a theory of poetry is identical with a theory of life." Illustrate from the poems prescribed for you.

Or

Q. 21. Write a short essay on Wallace Stevens' theory of poetry and show its relation to his actual poetic practice.

Ans. Like most modern poets such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Paul Valery, and Mallarme, Wallace Stevens is also seriously concerned with the theory of poetry. Many of his poems and essays are direct statements about what poetry is and ought to be and how it is related to life. According to Ronald Sukenick, Stevens' subject is a search for an attitude that would adequately and clearly confront the difficulties in contemporary American, secular life. To reach this goal, Stevens constantly hypothesizes fictions and creates heroes in an attempt to capture an intense state of mind. These fictions are not ideological formulations of belief but basically statements of "favourable rapport with reality sufficiently convincing that disbelief may be suspended." This is quite true because Stevens tries to view the reality from several different perspectives and then theorizes about it in his poetry. Whether he defines his theory of reality and imagination, or that of metaphor, or he expresses his disgust with Romantic decadence, Stevens is throughout his poems and essays concerned with what poetry ought to be.

To write a poetry which is immediately relevant to the modern situation, it is necessary to understand the world and the reality that governs it. It necessitates a freshness of perception bare of the projections that the human mind, thinks largely to received ideas, may distort. This is why in his early "The Snow Man" Stevens emphasizes the need to have a mind of water to look at the winter landscape and behold "Nothing which is not there and the nothing that is there." It is because of this belief that Stevens rejects old ideas, traditional beliefs, habitual modes of thought and argument, and most significantly, religious myths and

beliefs. Simultaneously, he rejects accepted contemporary views on politics, religion and philosophy etc., since these are equally strong barriers to the understanding of reality.

Stevens also recognizes that reality by itself is not enough, especially because it is always in a state of flux and its identification varies with the change of the perspective from which it is perceived. This explains why Stevens often talks of metamorphosis:

> Poetry is almost incredibly one of the effects of analogy. This statement involves much more than the analogy of figures of speech since otherwise poetry would be little more than a trick. But it is almost incredibly the outcome of figures of speech or, what is the same thing, the outcome of the operation of one imagination on another, through the instrumentality of the figures. To identify poetry and metaphor or metamorphosis is merely to abbreviate the last remark.

Metaphor is for Stevens a name for metamorphosis because it links the two planes of reality: the reality as seen, and the reality as transformed by imagination. Stevens makes this point clear in another place:

> In metaphor (and this word is used as a symbol for the single aspect of poetry which we are now concerned, that is to say: the creation of resemblance by the imagination, even though metamorphosis might be a better world)—in metaphor, the resemblance may be, first, between two or more parts of reality; second, between something real and something imagined. . . and, third, between two imagined things.

As Sister Quinn paraphrases Stevens' argument in "Three Academic Pieces," Stevens "concerns himself first of all with the structure of reality; secondly, with the way in which man knows his world; and finally, with the transfigurations of that world as imagination acts upon it." These views can be illustrated from three of Stevens' poems on poetic theory and practice.

In "Poems of Our Climate" Stevens emphasizes how the artistic perfection that traditional aestheticians found in simple beauty has become outdated:

> Say even that this complete simplicity
> Stripped one of all one's torments, concealed
> The evilly compounded, vital I
> And made it fresh in a world of white,

A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,
Still one would want more, one would need more,
More than a world of white and snowy scents.

The reason underlying this dissatisfaction is that

The imperfect is our paradise.
Not that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

Secondly, in order to express reality from a fresh viewpoint, it is necessary to discard all traditional thoughts and images. This is the subject of "The Man on the Dump."

Day creeps down. The moon is creeping up.
The sun is a corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche
Places there, a bouquet. . . . The dump is full
Of images.

Modern poetry cannot deal with this material from the heap of garbage; nor can it rely on old romantic attitudes. Stevens criticizes the romantic concept of imagination for the same reason, namely, that it inhibits fresh perception and converts a healthy emotion into facile sentimentality:

> The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty. It is a failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is a failure of feeling. The imagination is the only genius. It is intrepid and eager and the extreme of its achievement lies in abstraction. The achievement of the romantic, on the contrary, lies in minor wish-fulfilments and it is incapable of abstraction.

Stevens thus prefers a poetry of the mind which can abstract the basic truths from the flux of experience. In "Of Modern Poetry", he makes this point quite clear:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find; the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.

But the scene has changed and the poet faces a new audience. So,

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice.

The idea is repeated with a little variation in both "Credences of Summer" and "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself." In the former, Stevens restates his theoretical position:

> Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
> Let's us see it with the hottest fire of sight.
> Burn everything or part of it to ash.
>
> Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
> Without evasion by a single metaphor.

That is to say, if metaphors become a hindrance to the description or even perception of reality, these have to be discarded. In "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" Stevens demonstrates how the thing precedes the idea:

> That scrawny cry—it was
> A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
> It was part of the colossal sun,
> Surrounded by its choral rings,
> Still far away. It was like
> A new knowledge of reality.

But reality, Stevens believed, is always in a state of flux and so the poet-perceiver must see it in its change. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" provides a fine example of how the perspective changes when the blackbird interacts as a mediator between the perceiver and the perceived. In this respect Stevens' poetry is a poetry of consciousness, and it distinguishes him from poets who show an enthusiasm for the dignity of the commonplace.

To conclude in the words of Ronald Wagner, "Stevens' poetry sets forth his theory of reality and speaks to us of the human need to master reality; and that theory and that need become a theoretic vision for the reader, incarnate, let us say, in 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.' This poem. . . is a new object of moral imagination: insofar as it is successful, it confronts reality anew and transcends reality. The spirit is drawn forth and liberated by the moral power of the poetry; so that each initiated reader is like 'a man returning from Nowhere to his village. . . which he has come to cherish and wants to be near'—like Marcel returning to Combray after testing the madeleine dipped in tea."

Q. 22. Write critical appreciation of one of the following poems: "Sunday Morning," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "The Idea of Order at Key West," "Anecdote of the Jar", "Of Modern Poetry," "Poems of Our Climate", "The Emperor of Ice-Cream."

Ans. Please see the section on the critical analyses of individual poems.